

Local

GRADD's frozen meal program receives national award

 By Jacob Mulliken Messenger-Inquirer

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Green River Area Development District was awarded the 2019 Rural Achievement Award by the National Association of Regional Councils on June 11, at NARC's 53rd annual conference in Omaha, Nebraska, for its partnership with Owensboro Health Regional Hospital and Senior Community Center of Owensboro Daviess County in the senior frozen meal program.

The program, which began in December 2017, is geared toward eliminating food waste by providing unused meals from OH to the senior center to be provided to homebound seniors throughout the community, Dana Peveler, senior center executive director, said.

"It helped us expand; it allowed us to be able to serve an additional two meals to clients that otherwise didn't have that resource on the weekends," she said. "We knew there were some clients that only had their daily noon meal, and on weekends they had no meals. They were stretching out their food during the week and making choices between their medicine and going to the grocery. This freed up some dollars for them and provided extra meals, allowing them to breathe a little bit."

Since its inception, the program has grown to provide roughly 155 extra meals a week to 50 to 60 families. Currently, they have doled out 9,534 meals and are quickly approaching a benchmark of 10,000.

The additional meals have had a visible "positive," impact on the senior center's clients, both mentally and physically, she said.

"We found that people that had been on the program at least six months saw a decrease in their nutrition risk," she said. "At least half of the people that stayed in the program saw improvement in areas based on their ability to have more than two meals, eat fruits and vegetables, access to money and weight loss."

The program began through a program called, "Stop the Waste," developed through Morrison Healthcare.

Larry Little, Morrison senior executive director of food and nutrition services, said the company has provided food services to OH for four years.

"It is a program that seeks organizations and venues that can use food that has been prepared," he said. "The client has to meet our needs and prove that they can handle the food that has been provided in a safe manner. It allows us to cut down on food waste and address a need of hunger, especially among our seniors. It is a win-win for everybody."

What prevents beneficial programs like this from even getting past the development stage is the all mighty dollar, but for the frozen meals program, the initial cost was only a matter of time, Debbie Zuerner Johnson, OH director of community engagement, said.

"The beauty of this project is that the cost initially was the cost of time," she said. "It was simply getting together and getting the right people together to brainstorm through the how-tos and the greatest need. If they (senior center) had the capabilities, if it (the program) met the criteria that it needed to meet. It was sweat equity in the finest of ways; it was all time and available resources."

Everything was in place -- GRADD had the contract with Meals on Wheel that was already delivering food to homebound seniors Monday through Friday.

OH had the food and the senior center knew the population that was suffering from food insecurities and rationing out weekly meals so that they could eat on the weekends. The only hiccup initially came from the aluminum packaging that the frozen meals were originally packaged in, forcing seniors to take an "extra-step," she said.

"A van driver through Meals on Wheels informed us of the issue," she said. "The senior center wrote a grant to Owensboro Health Community Health Investment Grant Program for \$13,000. It was a small grant to be able to purchase the appropriate packaging, and we granted those dollars. This isn't some program that is costing anyone millions of dollars; this is using what is already in place to think differently and address a real need. The call to action was simply do something about it, so we did."

GRADD has been vigilant in churning out award applications, not for the accolades, but to bring state and national awareness to the program, Jeanette Woodward, GRADD social assistance management system and database administrator, said.

"Our whole purpose in writing these applications is getting the word out in the hopes that it will spread," she said. "The state's Department of Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) is trying to find a way, and is writing some grants, to fund the program and start it statewide. The whole purpose of these awards is to grow what has been a wonderful program."

Johnson and Peveler will be taking their show on the road in September as they present a workshop at the Association of Southern States' Southeastern Association of Area Agencies on Aging's Southeast Conference for Aging, Peveler said.

"We are presenting on the program in the hopes that other states will want to take this and replicate it," she said. "The fact that they want to is very humbling, especially given that they see the benefit of it."

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