Safeguard Home-Delivered Meals

STATE ISSUE BRIEF

608-228-7253
emily.petersen@gwaar.org
gwaar.org/waan
@WAAN.ACTION



Home-Delivered Meal Services, a solution to help older Wisconsinites age at home

Wisconsin is home to over 1.5 million older adults (ages 60+).[1] This equates to more than one of every four Wisconsin residents! The Older Americans Act (OAA) home-delivered meal (HDM) program is a proven, effective way to support Wisconsinites as we age, as well as offer support to our family caregivers.

HDMs, often referred to as Meals on Wheels, are more than food – they are a vital service that sustains lives and independence by providing nutritious food, safety checks, socialization, and connections to services. A 2023 survey revealed for **nearly 70%** of the 34,000 people served, **this meal was their main source of food and nutrition each day.**[2]

State funding makes up about 3% of total program funding. Additional state funding would help local programs:

- **Meet level of need.** Current funding can support only 70% of the projected demand for meals each year. Funding is needed for almost 800,000 meals (approximately $11 million).
- **Meet unprecedented levels of need:** On average, Wisconsin's nutrition programs have reduced the number of home-delivered meals they can offer by 18% since 2021.
- **Cover increased expenses driven by inflation and a lack of resources:** The average cost to provide a meal in Wisconsin is $13.81, a 27% increase over 2018 costs and a 7% increase from the prior year. Costs are projected to continue to increase at least 3% each year. For many counties demand for HDMs exceeds their capacity.[2]
- **Address revenue shortfalls:** Flat or small funding increases despite rising food and delivery costs, a growing demand and a shortage of volunteers result in many programs being unable to offer meals to all eligible older adults. 15 agencies have no volunteer drivers and must rely on paid drivers. Local funding, currently at 47% of total program funding in 2025, is maxed out.[4]

WAAN's Position:

Older Americans Act Home-Delivered Meals (HDMs) are a cost-effective investment providing eligible Wisconsinites a meal, socialization, and wellness check. **An increase of $7.7 million GPR in each year of the budget is needed to meet the need across the state.**

Home-Delivered Meal Services provide solutions[3]:

- **Reduce social isolation and loneliness,**
- **Reduce health care costs and nursing home admission,**
- **Reduce fall risk,**
- **Increase home safety and ability to age in place,**
- **Increase food security and improved diet quality,**
- **Improve nutrition status**
- **Provide access to additional supports.**

"When you can't get outside, it is like being in solitary confinement. The knock, the meal the visit – it's everything." **HDM Participant**

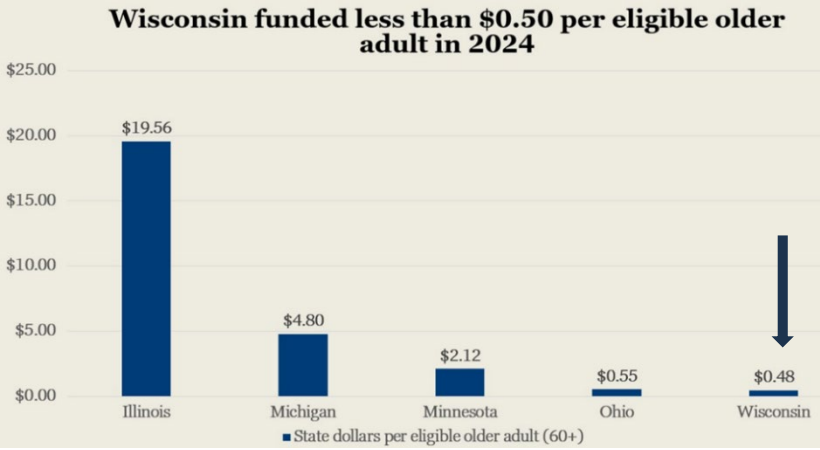
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Most of us plan to remain living in our homes as we age. HDM services help to make our plans a reality. The services and resources received from the program play a crucial role in enabling people to live more nourished and independent lives in their homes as they age, avoiding costly long-term care institutions or worsened health outcomes. The ability to access crucial HDM services in a *timely and consistent manner* is key to the program's successful intervention to support the health and independence of older adults. Yet, reaching all older Wisconsinites who need meals remains constrained by funding and capacity limitations.

Nearly 23,000 HDM program participants received meals and services in 2025,[2] 72% are age 75 +, 54% live alone, and 46% reside in a rural area.

- **One-third have no one else coming to visit or check on them,**
- **For one-third the only person they see on a given day is the HDM driver,**
- **25% live on income at/or below the poverty level, and**
- **50% are at risk for poor nutrition, and 20% have decreased appetite &/or have lost weight unintentionally.**

As of April 2026, more than **half** (43) **of Wisconsin counties** report that they must **maintain waitlists, cannot serve their entire county, must prioritize who receives meals, and/or have reduced the number of meals provided each week.**[4]



One year of home-delivered meals, including the daily wellness check, costs approximately $3,500, which is approximately the same cost of one day in the hospital or 10 days in a long-term care facility in Wisconsin [2]

Additional state funding is needed to safeguard the well-being and dignity of older Wisconsinites by **ensuring no eligible participant will have to wait for this critical service** and all will have access to this essential program!

For more information see WAAN's HDM infographic: https://gwaar.org/api/cms/viewfile/id/2009013

Sources: *(continued on page 3)*

Find this and other WAAN issue briefs at: https://gwaar.org/issues-and-initiatives

Core member organizations

Aging and Disability Professionals Association of Wisconsin (ADPAW) • Alzheimer's Association Wisconsin Chapter Board on Aging and Long Term Care (BOALTC) • InControl Wisconsin
Wisconsin Adult Day Services Association (WADSA) • Wisconsin Association of Area Agencies on Aging (W4A)
Wisconsin Association of Benefit Specialists (WABS) • Wisconsin Association of Nutrition Directors (WAND)
Wisconsin Association of Senior Centers (WASC) •Wisconsin Family and Caregiver Support Alliance (WFACSA)
Wisconsin Institute for Healthy Aging (WIHA) • Wisconsin Senior Advocates
Wisconsin Senior Corps Association (WISCA) • Wisconsin Tribal Aging Unit Association

Mission

The Wisconsin Aging Advocacy Network (WAAN) works with and for all older adults by educating community members and policy makers on priority issues while advocating for meaningful change. Learn more at gwaar.org/waan.

Home-Delivered Meals Sources:

1) State Fact Sheet 2024 – Wisconsin, Meals on Wheels America, https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/WI.pdf

2) Bureau of Aging and Disability Resources HDM Profile 3/3/2026

3) Meals on Wheels America, National Snapshot 2026 https://www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org/research/fact-sheet-supporting-senior-health-and-independence-while-saving-money/

4) Wisconsin Statewide Advocacy Survey 4-30-26

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