

A DOGE pothole? Seniors scared Meals on Wheels could be on chopping block

As layoffs and other cuts roil federal agencies, Meals on Wheels workers, volunteers and recipients brace for a bumpy ride ahead.



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Rose Marie Delagram says she doesn't like to watch the news lately.

The 89-year-old from Whiting, New Jersey, finds it stressful to see reports about federal layoffs and spending cuts, and she worries how it will affect her daily deliveries from her local Meals On Wheels program.

"With all these cuts going on everywhere I am very concerned," the mother of two, grandmother of three and great-grandmother of five said. "It's a very stressful situation."

That seems to be a common feeling among the people connected to Meals On Wheels programs across the country. The uncertainty is shared by those who work directly with seniors and homebound people who rely on daily visits and hot, nutritious meals.

It's felt by advocates in Washington, D.C., who worry about funding shortfalls and layoffs. And it's perhaps most acute among the people who rely on Meals On Wheels, whose health and well-being often hinge on nourishment they might not otherwise be able to access.

The uncertainty comes amid [layoffs reportedly hitting 40% of the staff](#) at the [Administration for Community Living](#), a federal agency under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that administers programs that support older adults, including home-delivered meals.

HHS characterized the reduction in force as a "[dramatic restructuring](#)" in an announcement March 27 under the orders of the [Elon Musk](#)-led Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

'A lot of question marks right now'

Meals On Wheels providers' primary source of federal funding comes through the [Older Americans Act](#). The entire staff overseeing Social Services Block Grants, funding that providers rely on to bridge the growing shortfalls from other public funding sources, was terminated as part of the reorganization. It is unclear now how that will be administered and whether it will be included in future budgets approved by Congress.

"There are a lot of question marks right now," said Josh Protas, chief advocacy and policy officer at Meals on Wheels America, the leadership organization that supports a network of local, community-based Meals on Wheels programs nationwide.

There haven't been any disruptions in service that he's aware of, Protas said. But he and others on the ground worry that federal cuts might hurt local programs.

The programs are already underfunded – Protas noted that 1 in 3 local Meals On Wheels programs have a waiting list – and their effectiveness has been proven for more than 50 years.

"We know the difference we can make in people's lives and in their communities," Protas said. "We just need adequate levels of funding and support to do that even more effectively."

What Meals on Wheels does

Meals On Wheels America is the national organization that supports local efforts to deliver food to seniors and homebound people through funding, programming, education, research, advocacy and partnerships.

Local Meals On Wheels organizations coordinate and make deliveries, and, in many cases, organize and host meals and activities in a group setting.

In Ocean County, New Jersey, [seniors can also gather for a meal and crafts, chair exercises and other activities at a community center.](#)

Meals On Wheels of Ocean County receives about 20% of its funding from the federal government, said Heather DeJong, its community relations specialist. It serves about 1,700 people – so a loss of federal money means 300 fewer people getting meals and services.

Seniors who saw news reports about the executive orders and DOGE-related cuts to federal funding, she said, were concerned: "Our drivers came back and told us seniors were asking, 'Am I going to get a meal tomorrow?'"

More than a meal: Wellness checks and beyond

Meals On Wheels drivers do more than drop off a meal: They are a daily wellness check for seniors and other people who are homebound. They can look for signs of cognitive or other health problems or abuse. And they're a connection to the outside world, a daily reminder that other people care.

Delagram is one of the seniors who receives home-delivered meals she described as "delicious and wonderful" from Meals On Wheels of Ocean County. She lives alone and looks forward to the deliveries and the few minutes of conversation with the drivers, appreciative that they're "always on time, always pleasant, always kind."

Those deliveries, along with regular check-ins by her daughters and grandchildren, help her maintain her independence, she said.

More than meals: Meals on Wheels rolling at 50, bringing food, connections, sunshine to seniors

In an online report, "[The Case for Meals on Wheels](#)," the national organization cites a host of studies pointing to local programs' successes, including decreased feelings of social isolation among seniors, healthier eating and better nutrition.

It also helps keep seniors in their homes and out of institutional settings like nursing homes and assisted living facilities – a long-term way of saving taxpayers money, Protas said.

"Many of these changes are taking place under the auspices of efficiency," he said. " (Meals On Wheels) programs set the gold standard for that. We help keep seniors at home, out of hospitals and costly institutional settings."

A reimbursement model for local programs

Meals On Wheels America itself has not been hit with layoffs, Protas said, and for now leaders are trying to reassure their community partners that they'll continue their support and advocacy.

"We're trying to share all the information we have, trying to listen to our network and understand questions they have," Protas said. "We recognize the anxiety they have, and we'll continue with our best reassurances that we're fighting for them. There's a broad recognition for the benefits of Meals On Wheels."

Community-based programs are reimbursed by the federal government, which makes future planning a challenge, especially as [food costs rise](#) and [tariffs loom](#).

"We are not trying to alarm our network, but we are recommending they put contingency plans in place so they don't have to make emergency decisions," Protas said.

"It's hugely important to know what our funding will be," Meals On Wheels of Ocean County's DeJong said. "We would like to move forward, but it's hard because of the uncertainty."

'Don't cut funding without looking under the hood'

DeJong said she has "letters ready to go to my elected officials" telling them, "Don't cut funding without looking under the hood" – to be sure they understand the impact and importance of Meals On Wheels programs not only in New Jersey but all over: in inner cities and rural areas, in [food deserts](#) and in places without reliable or extensive public transit.

"There is a lot of fear" among those served by Meals On Wheels of Ocean County, she said, "especially with more prices going up. We ask a \$3 donation, and where else can you get a hot meal for that?"

Delagram said she's fortunate to have family nearby and Meals On Wheels to deliver to her. She's concerned about those who aren't as fortunate as she is.

"There are people who are worse off than me and really depend on these services," she said. "If it's taken away, I don't know what seniors will do. ... It would be a complete disaster."