

Subsidised Café Meals Program: more than “just a cheap meal”

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This paper describes the Café Meals Program that is operating in the City of Yarra. The Program has resulted from a collaboration of North Yarra Community Health (NYCH) and City of Yarra, and aims to improve access to nutritious, affordable and socially acceptable meals for homeless people. The Program forms a part of City of Yarra’s Meals Program; it is managed by NYCH. The Café Meals Program is currently feeding 50-60 homeless people in Yarra. It targets those who are homeless (or at risk of becoming homeless), find it difficult to prepare their own meals, and have no other prepared meal options that are appropriate for them in the community. It provides a choice of four local cafés and restaurants for its participants. Each person is provided with a membership card that can be used once per day to purchase a meal (to the value of \$8.80) for the price of \$2.00. The program empowers clients by giving them control over when, where and what they will eat. It also enables the homeless person to participate in the life of the community by dining in venues where the general community eats and socialises. This improved sense of social connectedness and inclusion can have significant effects on the self-esteem of the program participants, and, subsequently, on their ability to make choices that improve their health and wellbeing. This paper presents this innovative program in detail and provides some insight into its outcomes, the components of the program that make it work, as well as the challenges that the program has had to address.

Key words: *Cafe Meals Program, Homelessness, Food insecurity, Food security, Food access, Social inclusion*

The Café Meals Program is a collaborative program of North Yarra Community Health (NYCH) and the City of Yarra. It provides homeless people with access to a low cost prepared meal, at a time that suits them, at one of the four participating cafes, once per day. The Café Meals Program enables participants to dine in a cafe with the rest of the community by making the café meals more affordable. The price of meals is kept low through subsidy.

People are referred to the Café Meals Program when they are unable to prepare meals for themselves and the prepared meal options in the community are not suitable or acceptable to them. The program therefore targets people who are homeless or living in insecure accommodation; who often lack the facilities, support and income to prepare meals for themselves, and who find that options such as council delivered meals or cheap communal dining establishments are not suitable for them.

The program has been trialled in various urban regions - where the expansion of cafés and restaurants designed for the “weekend tourist” and more affluent local population has limited the food options for the less affluent population. The City

of Yarra was one municipality that had previously established a small trial program.

Project funding from VicHealth and the Victorian Department of Human Services in 2001-2002 allowed the Café Meals Program to be expanded and remodelled to suit the local community in the City of Yarra, as a part of the Yarra Food Insecurity Community Demonstration Project. This funding has also enabled an external evaluation and documentation of the model. The Program subsequently received recurrent funding through the Home and Community Care Program (HACC), and has been incorporated into the broader City of Yarra Meals Program; as such its sustainability is assured. This paper will present the rationale of the Program, a description of the model, the outcomes and the components that make it work, as well as the challenges that have confronted the Program.

Background

Homelessness and its health consequences

The Council to Homeless Persons (1998) define a homeless person as someone who is “...without a conventional home and lacks the economic and social supports that a home normally affords. He

or she is often cut off from the support of relatives and friends, has few independent resources and often has no immediate means and, some cases, little prospect of self support.” Chamberlain (1999) definitions, as used in the national census, describe homelessness as including people living “on the streets” (primary homelessness), people in temporary or crisis accommodation (secondary homelessness) and people living in insecure housing or in housing that lacks the facilities to promote good health (tertiary homelessness).

The results of the 2001 census showed there to be a rate of 149 homeless people to every 10,000 population in Inner Melbourne (Council to Homeless Persons, 2004). Based on Yarra’s population of 68,018 (City of Yarra, 2003) we can assume there were at least 1013 homeless people in Yarra in 2001. This gives us an indication of the potential size of the target group for the Café Meals Program, although it is almost impossible for us to know how many of these people would also meet the other eligibility criteria for the Program, as were described in the introduction to this paper.

People who are homeless experience poor health and also have poorer access to health and welfare services (Swanborough, 1999; Victorian Homelessness Strategy Unit, 2002). This is not surprising when the health capital (“economic and social support”, “support of relatives and friends”, “independent resources” and “immediate means and ...prospect of self support” as cited earlier) that is vital to optimising good health is absent or minimal for this population. Consequently, the risk of poor nutritional health is high in the homeless population (Swanborough).

Homelessness and food insecurity

Food security exists when there is “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life” (Anderson, 1990). The core concept in the definition of food security is that safe, nutritious and culturally acceptable food is accessed regularly and reliably in “socially acceptable ways” and “through local non-emergency sources” (Community Food Security Coalition, 1995).

An individual’s food security can be challenged by the interaction of external (food supply) and internal (food access) factors (NSW Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 2003). External influences include location of food outlets, availability, variety, price, and quality of food in local outlets, as well

as the way food is promoted. Internal factors include financial resources, personal ability to walk or access transport to food outlets, storage and food preparation facilities, personal life skills, and social support structures.

Healthy Eating, Healthy Victoria (Victorian Department of Human Services, 1996) identifies the following groups as most vulnerable to food insecurity: low income families; people who have socioeconomic problems; people with mental illness; people who are non-English speaking; chronically ill people; frail elderly people; people affected by alcohol and/or substance abuse; homeless people; people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

The homeless population is particularly vulnerable to the food access aspect of food insecurity. Often there is a limited income for food and there may be limited (or no) food storage and food preparation facilities. Poor mobility and lack of social support may also impede access to food (Doljanin, 2002; Croxford, 1996). This becomes increasingly problematic in a community setting where the food supply is more expensive and is targeted to the more affluent sections of the population, as is the case in Yarra. Because food insecurity for this inner-urban population is compounded by the interaction of an incomplete or inappropriate food supply, and people’s individual food access issues, interventions aimed at improving food security need to address both these variables.

The Yarra Food Insecurity Community Demonstration Project collected data on the food insecurity issues for the local homeless population, highlighting the scale and intensity of the problem. Community consultation revealed that less than 25% of 49 people interviewed ate three meals per day, with 50% of respondents eating one meal per day or less (Doljanin, 2002). This project also revealed that 94% of respondents regularly relied on emergency relief for food (this includes food parcels, food vouchers, and free meals). Other studies also confirm that a significant proportion of people who are homeless rarely enjoy three meals per day and that many have limited funds for food, forcing them to rely on emergency relief (Croxford, 1996; Booth, 2004; Danton-Hill et al., 1990).

The consequences of irregular eating and limited food choices have both physical and psycho-social

manifestations. Irregular eating patterns along with a poor dietary variety have been shown to impact on individuals' cognitive and psychological functioning, immunity, iron status, obesity and hunger (Booth & Smith, 2001). It is now recognised that the consequences of food deprivation go beyond the physical manifestations and have psycho-social impacts associated with anticipated periods of deprivation and anxiety, related to the uncertainty of when they will obtain their next meal (Carlson, Andrews, & Bichel, 1999).

The Café Meals Program aims to provide an alternative dining option to address the fact that some individuals:

- are unable to prepare meals for themselves due to disability, lack of facilities or inadequate or unsafe food storage and food preparation facilities
- are too transient or not house-bound, making delivered meals inappropriate
- lack kitchen facilities or the ability to reheat delivered meals
- cannot afford the prepared meal options in the community (e.g., take-away or restaurant meals)

- do not find free or cheap meals offered by welfare establishments culturally appropriate or socially acceptable (Astbury, Elsworth, & Rogers, 2004).

The Café Meals Program: A description of the model

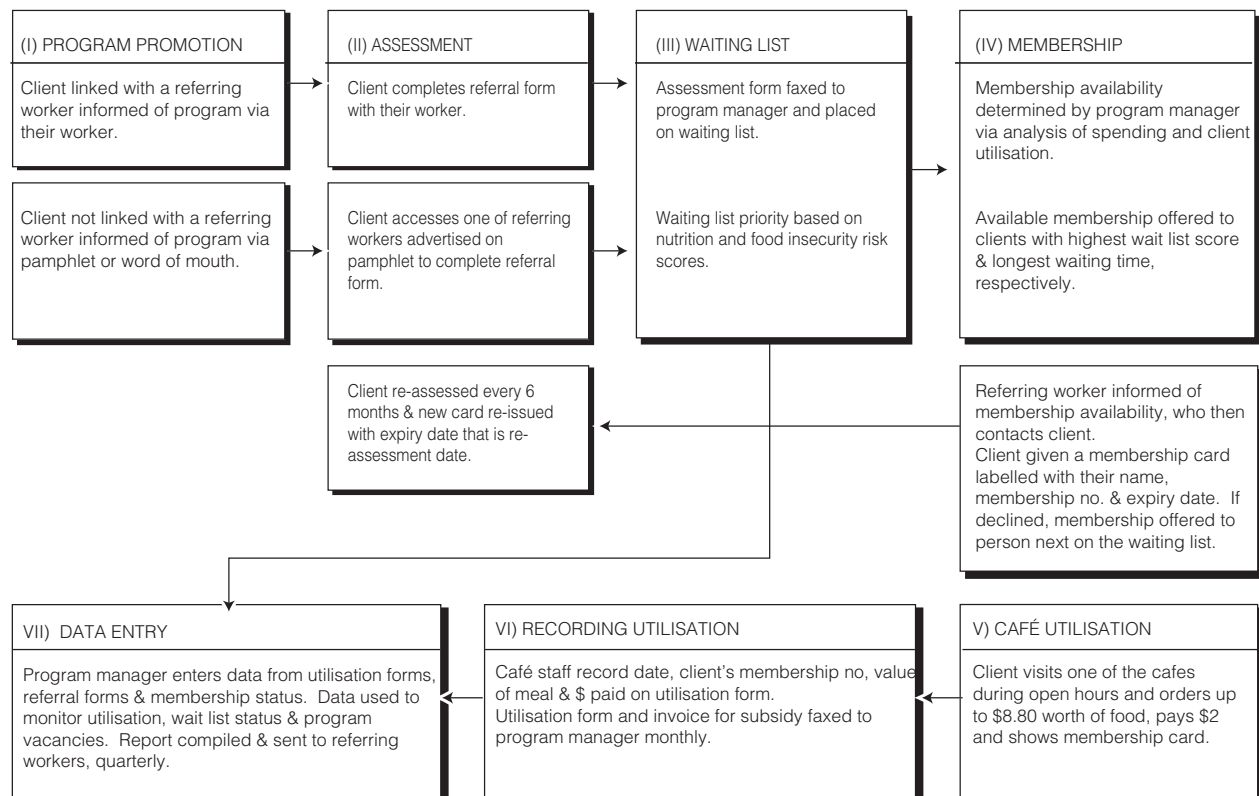
How it works

The Café Meals Program allows clients to access one meal per day at one of the four participating cafés. The clients present their membership card and pay \$2 for a meal valued up to \$8.80, with the remaining subsidy being covered by HACC Flexible Service Response funding. Clients can be referred to the program by any of a range of community workers across agencies in the City of Yarra (outreach support workers, dietitians, community nurses and Royal District Nursing Service Homeless Persons Program staff) and are re-assessed every six months. The program is managed by the program manager at NYCH. The model is summarised in Figure 1.

Program outcomes

The Café Meals Program began its implementation phase in June 2002. Internal evaluation of the

Figure 1: The Café Meals Program Model



Program was conducted by NYCH in October 2002, as a part of the Yarra Food Insecurity Community Demonstration Project. Additionally, the Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation (CIRCLE) at RMIT University were commissioned by VicHealth and NYCH in May 2003 to conduct a 12-month follow-up evaluation of the Café Meals Program. Internal evaluation used records of utilisation, client referral forms, client evaluation and satisfaction forms (of the 33 participants at the time, 19 forms were completed,) and interviews with café proprietors and referring workers. The external evaluation by CIRCLE involved interviews with the program manager, referring workers, café proprietors and six participants of the program. The results from internal and external evaluation have been documented in two final reports (Doljanin, 2003; Astbury et al., 2004) and are summarised below.

Outcomes for the program participants

Improvements in nutritional status

The impact of the Café Meals Program on nutritional status was difficult to quantify, as many referring workers are unable to measure weight and height of their clients. However, in the internal and external evaluation of the program, some participants reported improvements in weight, glycaemic control, appetite and a sense of general wellbeing. Referring workers also reported improvements in the appearance of some of their clients.

Improved frequency of meals

Impacts on frequency of eating are more clearly demonstrated. From the data collected from 19 participants who completed internal client evaluation and satisfaction forms it was reported that at referral 14 of these participants ate only once per day or less, and four ate 2-3 meals per day (with one non-respondent to this question). At evaluation eight of the 19 people reported eating once per day or less, and 10 were eating 2-3 meals per day. The program is accessed by each participant an average of 2-3 times per week; with utilisation varying from daily to once per month.

Increased focus on food and eating

In both internal and external evaluations referring workers and participants reported that the Café Meals Program empowered clients to address their food security issues by:

- 1) Restoring a trust in the “system” and workers, allowing improved dialogue and client understanding regarding their food security determinants.
- 2) Increasing the assurance of a regular meal which decreased the hunger-food seeking cycle, and was demonstrated in participants eating more regularly.
- 3) An improvement in nutrition, which increased participants’ ability to address their individual food insecurity determinants.
- 4) The regular social interaction with café staff assisted in improving participants’ confidence and social skills, which also impacted on participants’ ability to address their food insecurity issues.

The consequence of the abovementioned was demonstrated by the increase in number of participants cooking for themselves (from two to seven people of the 19 surveyed) and a decrease in the number of participants relying on emergency relief (from eight to six people).

Social benefits

Program participants, café proprietors and referring workers overwhelmingly report that the strength of the Café Meals Program lies in the social outcomes for participants. The program provides opportunity for social interaction - with café staff, other patrons, and/or family or friends that some participants bring in to dine with them. The benefits of this include:

- the opportunity for improved interpersonal skills, that can sometimes be lost due to social isolation
- a perception of social inclusion or feeling a part of the community by eating in a “mainstream” café where everyone else eats
- improved self-esteem/confidence in providing the choice of a “dignified eating environment” and through positive interaction with café staff.

Economic benefits

Provision of cheap meals made it affordable for participants to eat regularly in a gentrified environment where the price of food is becoming increasingly unaffordable for this target group. This was strengthened with café proprietors allowing participants to pay for meals 1-2 weeks in advance,

reducing the pressure to come up with money at the end of a pension payment period.

The secondary economic benefit lies in the potential to gain employment. The program alone does not assure this; however, ongoing positive social engagement with café staff and patrons can increase participant confidence, pride in one's appearance, social skills and other competencies that can improve chances of employment.

Outcomes for organisations and the community

- Referring workers report that the program helps them engage with clients - helps restore trust by offering something that is “tangible and immediate” for participants who have a sense of distrust toward health and welfare agencies.
- Participating organisations have an improved relationship and consequently improved referrals between organisations.
- Increased community awareness of food insecurity and worker's capacity to address food insecurity.
- Reduced discrimination against clients by tackling community stereotypes and myths about welfare recipients and breaking down barriers between marginalised groups, traders, and the broader community.
- Café proprietors felt the program raised their profile (through the media), as well as their income.
- The Café Meals Program is a cost effective method of offering prepared meals, when compared with traditional delivered meal programs. A meal in the Café Meals Program costs the Program \$6.60 and the client \$2.00 per meal accessed, compared with \$7.50 program costs and \$4.50 client costs for Yarra's delivered meals program.

Program components essential to success

Many factors contribute to delivering the abovementioned benefits of the Café Meals Program.

Funding

A program such as this is obviously dependant on funds to cover the subsidy of meals. The program receives recurrent HACC Flexible Service Response funds, which cover the meal subsidy of \$6.80.

These funds also cover the 0.1 EFT allocated to the program manager. The amount of HACC funding has increased since the program began in 2002, when it allowed 40 program participants; it now enables 50-60 people to utilise the program. The incorporation of the program into the City of Yarra Meals Program has also assisted its growth by providing access to some council funds. Despite this growth, there remains a waiting list of 50 people at any given time, and as many as another 900 homeless people who could potentially be eligible for the program in Yarra (as outlined earlier in this paper). The program is, however, included as a priority in the regional HACC plan for the next two years and the authors are hopeful of increased funding in future funding rounds.

Choice of Café

Café proprietors with a commitment to the program and a positive attitude towards clients have encouraged the ongoing patronage of clients by providing the positive social interaction that contributes to the social outcomes demonstrated.

Project management

A paid program manager has been vital to the co-ordination of the program. The program manager undertakes the important role of ensuring timely and effective communication with key stakeholders, as well as providing ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the program. This is vital to maintaining stakeholder commitment to the program as well as ensuring that the program remains viable and responsive. Additionally, the program manager takes responsibility for the administrative tasks that are vital to the program functioning.

Partnerships and consolidation of these relationships

Referring workers from a range of health and welfare agencies, local government and café proprietors have strongly participated in this program. This has been through their respective roles of referring clients and providing food and social opportunity for participants, and also through their involvement in the Café Meals Committee Meetings. These meetings have presented a forum for stakeholders to have input into the program, receive updates via quarterly reports and to communicate with one another. As a result, the program has enjoyed a broad ownership and

various champions that have been instrumental to securing recurrent funding.

Challenges

There have been numerous challenges in the development of this program. One of the early challenges was the engagement of relevant stakeholders. This proved easier than expected as the concern about the food security of homeless people was widespread in Yarra. NYCH undertakes a significant amount of work with the homeless population and had established ties with other agencies dealing with this target group, with local council, and with the target group themselves.

The recruitment of interested café proprietors occurred through mailouts and specific targeting of some cafés that were known to be “friendly” to homeless people. The relationship with these small business operators has required constant and ongoing attention. From the outset NYCH has had regular contact with the café owners to ensure their understanding of the program aims and philosophy, and to increase their knowledge of the issues faced by participants. This communication has occurred via individual visits, phone calls and also through meetings and workshops. Additionally, café proprietors have been involved with the promotion of the program; they have spoken at the launch of the program and have been quoted in media articles. This support has paid off; the external evaluation by CIRCLE identified the “attitude (of proprietors) toward the target group” and the impact of this “on the social objectives of the project” as a critical success factor of the Program (Astbury, 2004, p. 56).

Another significant challenge was to develop the program in a way that would be both flexible (in order to maximise access) and accountable. The small pilot program that had been running in Yarra previously had provided only one point of assessment (HACC assessment workers at council) and had complex assessment requirements. The City of Yarra had identified that this was inhibiting access to that program. Other previously trialled programs had also anecdotally reported issues around ensuring the accountability of participating cafés.

In order to address the access issue the authors developed relevant and simplified assessment tools.

Training was provided for staff in agencies in Yarra that provide services for the target group to become assessment and referral points. This increases the likelihood that a client will be assessed by a worker they already know and have rapport with and therefore significantly increases the reach and accessibility of the program. Additionally, workers will facilitate the first visit to a café for those participants who lack the confidence to do this on their own.

The utilisation of a numbered membership card provides both a respectful way for the participants to indicate their involvement in the program, and also an accountable method for café owners to record café data. Perhaps more important to the accountability of the Program, however, is the strong relationship that has been developed with the café proprietors, and the strong commitment to the program displayed by these proprietors.

The promotion of the Café Meals Program to funding bodies was an additional early challenge. Our response to this challenge was facilitated by the substantial amount of evaluation that has been undertaken, which allowed us to clearly demonstrate the success of the program and its ability to deliver on its objectives.

An outstanding challenge, or course, is the need to grow the program and thus make it accessible to a greater number of people in the homeless population. Potentially, the program could also be made available to other vulnerable target groups.

Conclusion

Eating well involves a complex interaction of factors; a person’s individual ability to acquire, prepare and consume food and the presence or absence of an environment that offers acceptable and affordable options. People who are homeless may find that both aspects of this food security equation are lacking, limiting their food choices. The Café Meals Program has attempted to address this by providing more affordable meals (through subsidy) in a range of venues; allowing participants to choose what they want to eat, where and when. The restoration of choice as well as positive social interaction with café staff has been important to the participants. The Café Meals Program strongly promotes the social and cultural importance of food and eating, and demonstrates that food programs have the capacity to enhance social inclusion and community cohesion.

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