

Introducing a Fresh Approach to Dining for Older Adults



In New York City, a network of over 300 older adult centers (OACs) serve as a vital resource to the nearly 1.8 million older adult New Yorkers.

These centers offer nutritious meals and a variety of engaging activities that has been proven to reduce social isolation, boost physical activity, and improve overall health. Despite the advantages, many older adults are either unaware of these services or don't feel it is for them. This stigma, combined with geographical and mobility obstacles, can hinder participation.

Recognizing the need to break down these barriers and draw more older adults to the welcoming and vibrant atmosphere of these centers, efforts are underway not just in NYC but nationwide.

In 2017, the Iowa Department on Aging tackled this challenge with their innovative Encore Café project, funded by the Administration for Community Living (ACL). This initiative modernized the traditional older adult dining model by introducing a café-style setting and expanding services to include case management, elder rights advocacy, and caregiver support. The project's success was highlighted in a 2021 [study](#) published in the Journal of Nutrition Gerontological Geriatrics, which reported a dramatic 3,164% increase in congregate nutrition program participation and a 386% rise in meal distribution.

Now, six years later, NYC Aging has embarked on a similar initiative with a five-year research grant awarded by ACL. The project aims to boost participation by launching pop-up cafés in areas without nearby OACs and identified as “food deserts.” These cafés would offer extended meal hours, diverse menu options that are culturally aligned with the neighborhoods, lighter fare such as yogurts and crudites, and activities that promote social engagement.



To date, NYC Aging and its partners have launched six pop-up café sites, with plans to open 12 more cafés over the next four years. So far, participants have praised the cozy atmosphere, fresh meals, and sense of community these sites offer. Notably, over 35% of the attendees are new to NYC Aging and its services, showcasing the project's early success.

But how will success be measured? NYC Aging has partnered with Dr. Manoj Pardasani, a renowned researcher in community services for older adults and Provost at Hunter College of NYC, to lead the research throughout the project. Key aspects of the research include gathering feedback from new members via surveys and exploring questions such as: Can this café model attract more older adults, including those who have been disconnected from OACs? Does it appeal to individuals looking for a different experience? Can it improve overall health by increasing engagement with activities, classes, and social opportunities? Additionally, the research will track whether new members continue to use NYC Aging services beyond the pop-ups. To provide a comprehensive evaluation, the study will assess the impact of traditional OAC programs on participants as well, leading to meaningful comparisons between the two models.

To learn more about NYC Aging and its initiatives, please visit our [About](#) page.

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