

GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-20-18, a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. population is aging and, by 2030, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that one in five Americans will be 65 or older. Recognizing that adequate nutrition is critical to health, physical ability, and quality of life, the federal government funds various programs to provide nutrition assistance to older adults through meals, food packages, or assistance to purchase food.

This report examines (1) the relationship of older adults' nutrition to health outcomes and the extent to which federal nutrition guidelines address older adults' nutritional needs, (2) nutrition requirements in federal nutrition assistance programs serving older adults and how these requirements are overseen, and (3) challenges program providers face in meeting older adults' nutritional needs. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance and conducted a comprehensive literature search; visited a nongeneralizable group of four states—Arizona, Louisiana, Michigan, and Vermont—and 25 meal and food distribution sites, selected for a high percentage of adults 60 or older, and variations in urban and rural locations, and poverty level; and interviewed officials from HHS, USDA, states, national organizations, and local providers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that HHS develop a plan to include nutrition guidelines for older adults in a future update, and that HHS and USDA improve oversight of meal programs and provide additional information to meal providers to help them meet older adults' nutritional needs. HHS and USDA generally concurred with our recommendations.

View GAO-20-18. For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or klarin@gao.gov.

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NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Agencies Could Do More to Help Address the Nutritional Needs of Older Adults

What GAO Found

Research shows that nutrition can affect the health outcomes of older adults. Federal nutrition guidelines provide broad guidance for healthy populations, but do not focus on the varying nutritional needs of older adults. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) data show that the majority of older adults have chronic conditions, such as diabetes or heart disease. Research shows that such individuals may have different nutritional needs. As older adults age, they may also face barriers, such as a reduced appetite, impairing their ability to meet their nutritional needs. HHS plans to focus on older adults in a future update to the guidelines, but has not documented a plan for doing so. Documenting such a plan could help ensure guidelines better address the needs of the population.

Of the six federal nutrition assistance programs serving older adults, four have requirements for food that states and localities provide directly to participants, and federal agencies oversee states' monitoring of these requirements. In HHS's and U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) meal programs, states must ensure meals meet requirements. Yet, HHS does not gather information from states, such as approved menus, to confirm this, and localities in two of the four selected states said state monitoring of menus was not occurring. Further, USDA regional officials told GAO they lack information on how meal programs operate at adult day care centers as they primarily focus on other sites for their on-site reviews. Additional monitoring could help HHS and USDA ensure meal programs meet nutritional requirements and help providers meet older adults' varying needs.

Examples of Lunches Served to Older Adults through Nutrition Programs in Selected States



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-18

In the states GAO selected, meal and food providers of the four nutrition programs with nutrition requirements reported various challenges, such as an increased demand for services. Providers in three of the four states reported having waiting lists for services. Providers of HHS and USDA meal programs in all four states also reported challenges tailoring meals to meet certain dietary needs, such as for diabetic or pureed meals. HHS and USDA have provided some information to help address these needs. However, providers and state officials across the four states reported that more information would be useful and could help them better address the varying nutritional needs of older adults.