

Bohse & Associates

“DISHING IT OUT” THE BOHSE WAY:

Cost Effective Food and Delivery Options

Nutrition programs strive to provide quality meals and service within a limited budget. Factors that influence the cost include the choice of menu and supply items (low versus higher cost items), purchasing methods, storage capacity, and the labor and overhead costs involved in the preparation, delivery, and service of the meals.

Over the last decade or so, the number of onsite kitchens has diminished, replaced by large, state-of-the-art centralized kitchen facilities. This change is designed to reduce the management of multiple cooks and kitchens, consolidate purchases, and hopefully, improve and standardize the quality of the meals at a lower cost. Centralization does require the delivery of the meals to other centers and requires added vehicles (with or without heating and refrigeration), pans, packing, holding/heating equipment, drivers, and insurance.

Also, the scheduling of the food production and delivery must be efficient and timely, particularly if the food is to be delivered to the sites hot and ready to serve. If you are considering preparation consolidation, be sure to involve all participants early in the planning stages to garner the support you will need. Stress the positive aspects of the move.

Frozen meals are a growing alternative to preparing and serving fresh, hot meals. Their popularity has been gaining, particularly for meals on wheels programs. Such meals may be prepared by the program's kitchen following local and state guidelines, purchased ready made from commercial manufacturers, or prepared by a caterer according to the program's contract specifications. The use of frozen meals was first considered as a means to provide clients with additional meals for the weekend when a program does not make deliveries. (In some cases, tight budgets have forced programs to discontinue preparing and delivering meals on the weekend.) Such meals would be delivered during the week and stored for weekend use. Programs have also expanded the use of frozen meals as an alternative to daily delivery of hot meals, especially in rural areas, but also in urban and suburban communities. This change reduces the management and cost of delivering meals on a daily basis.

Using disposable or reusable service ware are options that require careful investigation as to how each choice affects the program's bottom line as well as service quality. Each option has its place in nutrition programs. For reusable service ware, after the initial investment of supplies and dishwashing equipment (some of which may be donated), continued expenses relate to labor and equipment maintenance. Obviously, the esthetics of serving dining participants with silverware, plates, and glasses enhances the dining experience and reduces what is thrown out.

For meals on wheels programs, products that can be reused are usually limited to meal tray systems. Even so, such products may be a viable alternative in the long run to the continuous purchasing of disposables. Buying the product in an institutional or bulk size pack instead of a retail or single-service pack can lower food costs. For example, programs are grappling with the cost of ½ pints of milk. Buying the milk in bulk (in dispensers or ½ gallon or one gallon containers), for use at dining centers can save money. Labor and supply costs are considerations and are affected by the size of the program, use of volunteers, and whether disposables or reusable service ware is used. Some programs are serving quarts

of milk to meals on wheels clients, once or twice weekly, rather than delivering one or two ½ pints daily. Some portion-controlled, single service items are a mainstay for some programs and are a necessity for most meals on wheels programs. These include pats of margarine and condiment items, fruit cups, pudding cups, and ice cream. However, for congregate dining, it may be more cost effective to portion these items into cups or bowls.

Plan to have a reasonable mix of lower and higher priced food items on the menu. Protein foods such as whole meats, fish and poultry are more expensive than protein alternatives such as lentils and peas, beans, eggs, peanut butter, and cottage cheese. Less expensive cuts of meat such as chuck or round roast instead of sirloin will also have less fat. For ground beef, the lower priced beef will have more fat but there will be more shrinkage upon cooking. Therefore, one needs to pay attention to the product's cost per unit and the number of servings available after cooking due to shrinkage. USDA's Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs can help determine the net number of servings from a product.

Local food banks can be a good source of free and low cost food and supplies. Some items are regularly available, others on a one-time basis. Many food banks also offer their members group purchasing discounts on staple items. USDA food commodities may also be available through the State Unit on Aging or State Education Department (depending on your operation) and can provide very low cost items and discounts in manufactured products that use commodities as an ingredient.

These days, programs are encouraged to serve more fresh fruits and vegetables and to purchase such items from local farms when available. Making arrangements with producers prior to the season can lower costs.

Other cost-saving tips:

- Build the main part of the meal around rice, noodles or other grains to save on food costs as such items are usually inexpensive per serving. Casseroles and pasta dishes and Chinese style entrees and chili over rice are some examples.
- Use planned leftovers to save time and money. Prepare a double batch of a recipe (such as meat loaf) and freeze half of it to use the next time it is on the menu.
- Try store/distributor or generic brands of food items, as they are usually lower in price than name brand products and usually of good quality.
- Use convenience items when it is more practical in terms of labor, ingredient and equipment needs than to prepare some food items from scratch. These may include cake mixes, spaghetti sauce, frozen pie shells, frozen ravioli, etc.
- Use day old bread and bakery products.
- Buy fresh produce when in season.
- Select products with reduced sugar, fat, and sodium content that can be used for the general population as well as those on special diets. (For example, use canned fruits packed in water or juice rather than heavy syrup so that individuals with diabetes can use it as well, eliminating the need for substitutions.)

Resources

America's Second Harvest, the Nation's Food Bank Network

<http://www.secondharvest.org/>

Food Bank of New York City

<http://www.foodbanknyc.org/>

US Department of Agriculture Food Assistance Programs

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/fns/>

US Department of Agriculture Food Buying Guide

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/Resources/foodbuyingguide.html>