



GENERATE INCOME FOR THE GREATER GOOD

Nonprofits Get Creative to Finance Nutritious Meals for the Needy

By Melissa Ip, MA, RD

In these tough economic times, foodservice organizations have been forced to develop creative ways to stretch ever-shrinking budgets while providing high-quality, nutritious meals.

One organization that has succeeded in doing just that is Open Hand, a nonprofit group that provides free healthful meals to homebound seniors and the chronically ill in the Atlanta area. Open Hand is among several foodservice organizations engaged in social enterprise that involves adopting entrepreneurial approaches to generate income in support of its mission, which is to help people prevent and manage chronic disease by providing healthful meals and nutrition education.

Creative Financing

Since 1988, Open Hand has delivered 20 million meals to people in low-income areas suffering from cancer, HIV/AIDS, and other chronic diseases. Traditionally, the organization has been able to do this with support from individual donors, and government and corporate funding. But in the face of budget cuts, they couldn't continue at the same capacity. The solution: In 2005, Open Hand teamed up with Atlanta restaurateur and acclaimed chef Tom Murphy who developed a social enterprise unit called Good Measure Meals (GMM). GMM sells nutritious gourmet food to customers in Athens and Savannah, Georgia, and in the metro Atlanta area. All proceeds go to supporting Open Hand's free meal programs. Since its inception, GMM has generated \$14 million in revenue.

According to Charlotte Hayes, MMSc, MS, RD, CDE, senior director of program and policy development at Open Hand,

diversifying revenue streams is important for the fiscal health and sustainability of nonprofit agencies. Not only has Open Hand's social enterprise unit provided much-needed funds for its free programs, it's benefited the entire Atlanta community. "When GMM customers purchase meals, they're not only investing in their own health, they're supporting those in our community who are in greatest need of health-promoting food," Hayes says.

Meeting Customers' Needs

Serving more than 3,000 people each month, Open Hand and GMM make sure they meet their clients' needs. While volunteers at Open Hand deliver meals to the sick and homebound, GMM encourages customers to order meals online and choose home or office delivery or one of 60 locations to pick up their orders. Both programs stay attuned to their consumers' food preferences. Clients

of Open Hand favor Southern cuisine; one of the most popular meals is oven-roasted chicken with mustard sauce, collard greens, and southwest corn bread. GMM customers savor southwest chili lime tilapia with sweet corn and Anasazi beans; roasted turkey breast with apple-sage stuffing and ginger-glazed carrots; and peppers stuffed with lentils, brown rice, and Asiago and Monterey Jack cheeses.

The organizations' dietitians have developed both meal programs. They've modified traditional Southern recipes to increase their fiber and nutrient content while lowering the fat and sodium.

Open Hand and GMM offer a range of meal plans to meet the nutritional needs and preferences of its diverse clientele. Open Hand's therapeutic menu options include mechanical soft, diabetic, 2-g sodium, renal, dialysis, low fat, low lactose, and liquid. GMM offers daily meal plans that range from 1,200 to 2,100 kcal, including vegetarian cuisine and meals without seafood. What's more, Open Hand and GMM customers receive nutrition facts with their meals. And dietitians for both programs offer nutrition consulting services to those with chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and HIV/AIDS.

Similar Trailblazers

Other nonprofit organizations also have developed social enterprise programs. The similarly named Project Open Hand in San Francisco responded to customer demand for food that was increasing in price by developing a creative way to fund its programs: making peanut butter. Project Open Hand volunteers grind peanuts each day to make a creamy peanut butter with no added salt, sugar, or hydrogenated oils. The peanut butter is sold in stores across the San Francisco Bay area, from Whole Foods to neighborhood grocers and dessert cafés. Proceeds from the sales of the peanut butter benefit Project Open Hand's meal programs and raise public awareness of the organization.

Mather LifeWays, a nonprofit group serving older adults in the Chicago area, opened the first of four cafés in 2000 to help fund its foodservice programs. The Mather's More Than A Café locations (known as their Café Plus concept) reinvented the traditional senior center with its Starbucks-style restaurants, providing social events, computer and art classes, and health and fitness programs for seniors. The menu consists of familiar comfort foods and daily specials such as salmon burgers, Cajun lime tilapia, and chicken feta salad. While designed to serve older adults in the neighborhood, the cafés also serve food to younger customers. The cafés are a win-win for both Mather LifeWays and its clients. And Mather LifeWays teaches its Café Plus concept to other organizations serving senior citizens.

Opportunities in Social Enterprise

Social enterprises also provide employment opportunities for business-minded RDs, says Carol Coren, principal at Cornerstone Ventures LLC, a consulting group with offices in Pennsylvania and Oregon. Cornerstone Ventures offers assistance to RDs who are social entrepreneurs and to organizations committed to producing and supplying food in a way that's financially sound and environmentally sustainable. Social enterprises address the triple bottom line, which includes people, planet, and profit, Coren says.

With a focus on strengthening local food systems, Cornerstone Ventures has supported food entrepreneurs in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Oregon to build self-sufficient enterprises that strengthen farm-to-fork connections. Dietitians interested in assuming leadership roles in foodservice organizations so they can have a greater input into how food programs are run and who want to learn more about Cornerstone Ventures' services can visit www.cornerstone-ventures.com.

"There's not a more exciting time to become an RD in the foodservice industry," says Julie Shipkoski, MS, RD, food services manager at Open Hand. Dietitians in foodservice should explore opportunities to beef up their revenue streams by selling healthful foods customers want to buy. Dietitians should consider additional training in culinary arts, Shipkoski suggests. "Consumers won't eat food that doesn't taste great or leave them fully satisfied. It takes culinary skill, creativity, and innovative solutions to develop affordable, healthful, and flavorful meals."

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