



Let's Eat: The Need to Invest in Congregate Meals for Older New Yorkers



UNH Advocacy Brief
May 2025

Introduction

Many older New Yorkers rely on congregate meal programs at older adult centers for hot, healthy meals that meet their nutritional needs. In the first four months of FY 2025, nearly 88,000 older New Yorkers received 2.2 million congregate meals, representing a 10 percent increase from the prior year in the number of meals served and a three-percent uptick in the number of participants, according to the Preliminary Mayor's Management Report for FY 2025.¹

Congregate meals programs will continue to see higher demand from the City's growing older adult population. Nearly two million older adults aged 60 and over live in New York City, a 28-percent increase from 1.5 million a decade ago. With rising inflation and higher living costs, the City's older adult population is more likely to face financial hardship (nearly one in five live below the federal poverty line), struggle to make ends meet on fixed incomes, and experience food insecurity. **Congregate meal programs help address these challenges. To strengthen those programs and ensure they can continue to effectively feed older adults, New York City should deepen its investment in congregate meal programs, which have been chronically underfunded despite increased demand.**

Rising inflation has strained the budgets of settlement houses and other community-based organizations who run congregate meal programs at older adult centers. Twenty-one United Neighborhood Houses (UNH) settlement house members run congregate meals programs that serve lunch, and some that serve breakfast, to thousands of older adults a year. They are part of the City's network of over 300 older adult centers. Food costs in the New York City metro area are now 28 percent higher than they were in 2019, prior to the pandemic.² Despite the significant rise in food costs, the congregate meals budget has not increased in years, since the last time the program was procured in 2021.

Furthermore, the threatened loss of federal funding may put additional strain on the congregate meals program at older adult centers. The Trump Administration recently announced a massive restructuring of the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which included the elimination of the Administration for Community Living, an HHS office that provides grants to states for congregate meals programs and other critical nutrition services for older adults. Investments in NYC's congregate meal programs will ensure we have well-functioning programs that can continue to thrive if additional federal cuts are implemented.

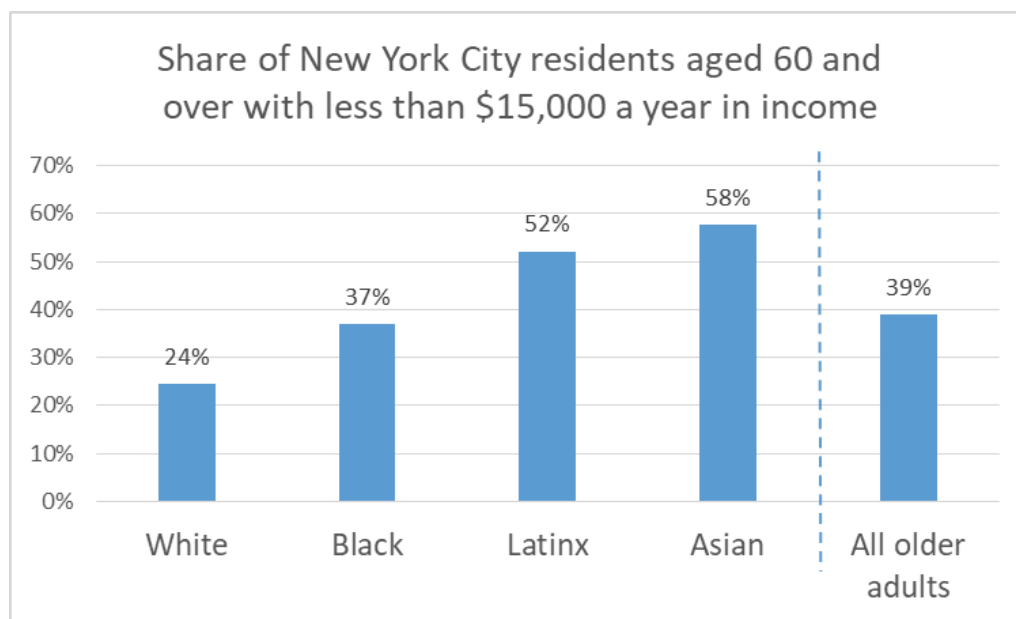
Using data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Census Bureau, and a focus group of 15 settlement houses with congregate meal programs, this advocacy brief highlights growing food and economic insecurity among older adults, as well as rising food costs that affect the ability of settlement houses and other CBOs to meet the greater demand for congregate meals at older adult centers. These factors underscore **the need for the City to invest a total of \$57 million in new funding for congregate meals in the FY26 Budget**—this amount includes the restoration of the \$7 million PEG (Program to Eliminate the Gap) cut to congregate older adult center meals from the FY 2024 Adopted Budget and the investment of least \$50 million to cover inflation costs.

¹ Preliminary Mayor's Management Report, January 2025, City of New York
https://www.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2025/2025_pmmr.pdf

² Based on an analysis of changes in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers between March 2019 and March 2025 for the New York City metro area.

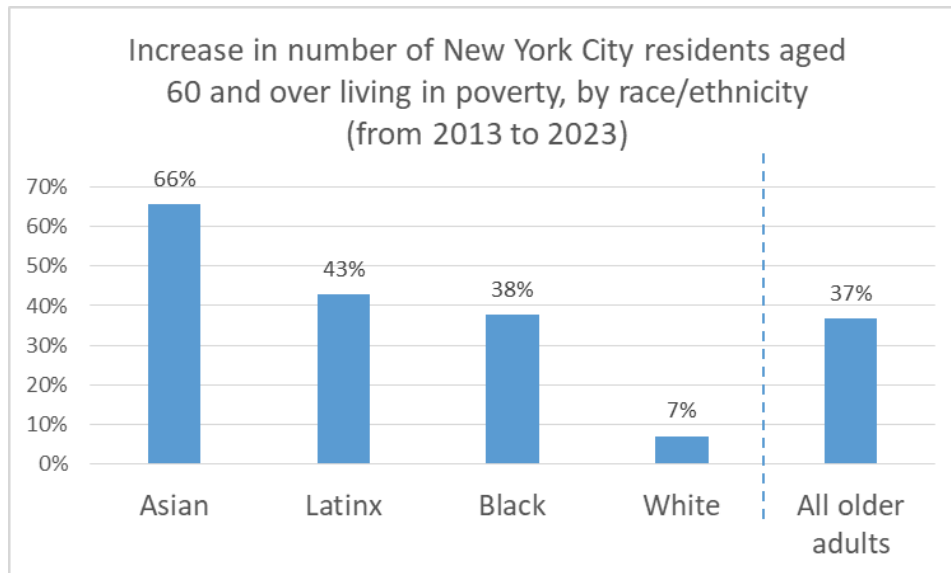
New York City's older adult population has increased, while becoming more economically insecure

As of 2023, there are 1.9 million older adults aged 60 and over living in New York City, up 28 percent from 1.5 million a decade ago (in 2013), according to data from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Older adults now make up nearly one in four New York City residents (24 percent). The City's burgeoning older adult population is increasingly at risk of financial hardship – citywide, nearly one in five older adults aged 60 and over live in poverty (19 percent), up from 17 percent prior to the pandemic (in 2019). Nearly 40 percent of older adult New Yorkers have less than \$15,000 in income, compared to 29 percent of New Yorkers aged 18 to 59. Furthermore, 58 percent of Asian older adults are living on less than \$15,000 a year, more than double the share of White older adults (24 percent).



Source: US Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey data, 1-year estimates

Asian and Latinx older adults are twice as likely as White older adults to live in poverty (23 percent of Asian older adults and 30 percent of Latinx older adults live in poverty, compared to just 12 percent of White older adults). Over the past decade, the number of older adults in New York City living in poverty has increased by 37 percent, from 269,000 in 2013 to 367,000 in 2023. **The increase in poverty has been notable among the City's Asian older adult population – the number of Asian older adults living in poverty has increased by 66 percent since 2013.**



Source: US Census Bureau, 2023 American Community Survey data, 1-year estimates

Note: Living in poverty refers to those living at or below the federal poverty line, which was \$18,430 for a household with two people aged 65 and over in 2023.

Food insecurity persists among New York City's older adult population, with congregate meals programs and food pantries experiencing increased demand from older adults

A recent survey of older adults conducted by Citymeals on Wheels and the CUNY Urban Food Policy Institute found that nearly half of older adults using older adult centers and home-delivered meal programs experienced food insecurity in the past year.³ Findings from a focus group of UNH settlement house members confirm worsening food insecurity among the older adults they serve, with several providers noting that they have seen an increasing number of older adults who participate in their food pantries. One Brooklyn-based provider noted that their two older adult centers host New York Common Pantry food distributions and these pantry distribution days are their highest attendance days of the month. Another provider on the Lower East Side noted that they have a pop-up food pantry every Monday in collaboration with City Harvest that is primarily fresh produce, and that “90 percent of people attending the pantry are seniors.”

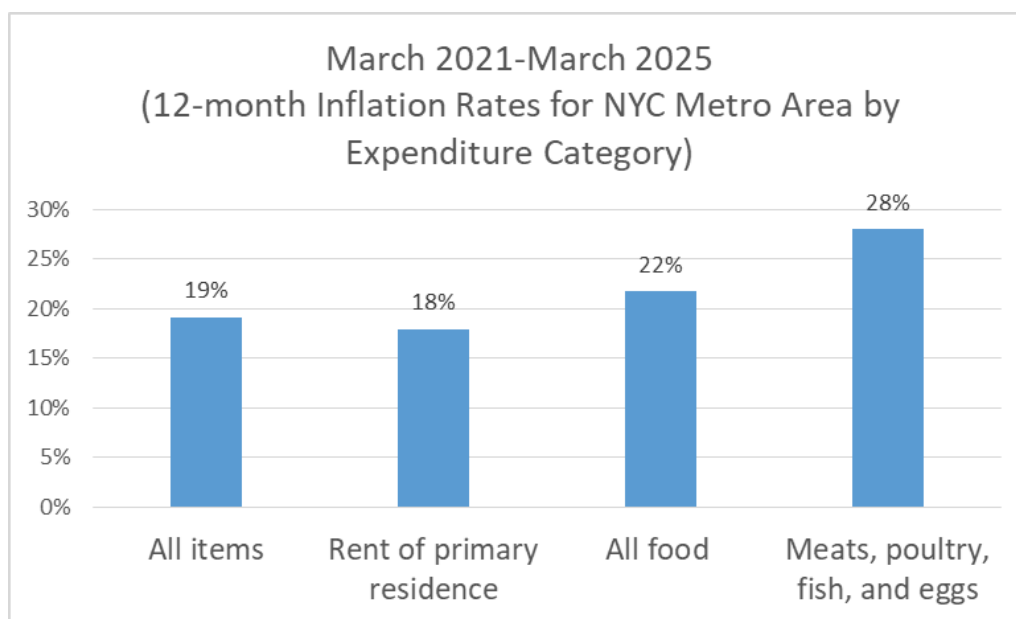
Several settlement house focus group participants noted that they are seeing higher attendance at their congregate meals programs, with some providers noting that they have a lot of older adults who come to their older adult centers just for meals. One provider on the Lower East Side noted that they are serving more meals than they are contracted for and that they are still turning people away: “we get so many people and there isn’t enough food.” A provider serving older adults on the Upper East Side and East Harlem noted, “we do announcements of what programs are coming up, but even then many [older adults] strictly come for lunch.” While not all centers are overserving from their contracted values, several settlement house focus group participants have indicated an increase in older adults coming in for meals over the last several years.

³ Citymeals on Wheels, *Aging Without Hunger, Ending Food Insecurity for Older Adults by 2040*: <https://www.citymeals.org/ending-elder-hunger-2040#:~:text=Nearly%20half%20of%20older%20New,are%20never%20able%20to%20cook>

Older adults are struggling with rising living costs and are stressed about inflation

Settlement house staff noted that many participants rely on congregate meals as their main food source, yet they are unable to contribute toward the cost of their meals due to fixed incomes and rising living expenses. Under the Older Americans Act, older adult centers are required to provide participants in congregate meals programs with the option of a voluntary contribution. NYC Aging allows older adult centers to reinvest this funding back into their program budgets. However, providers have noted that contributions have dropped significantly post-pandemic due to growing economic insecurity among the older adults they serve. One provider noted, “Our contribution is almost non-existent. I think it has to do with food insecurity and the fact that everything is going up in price. Seniors live on a fixed income, and have to pay rent, utilities. It’s a hardship for them.” Although fewer older adults are able to provide a voluntary contribution, they remain a required budget component, causing deficits when unmet.

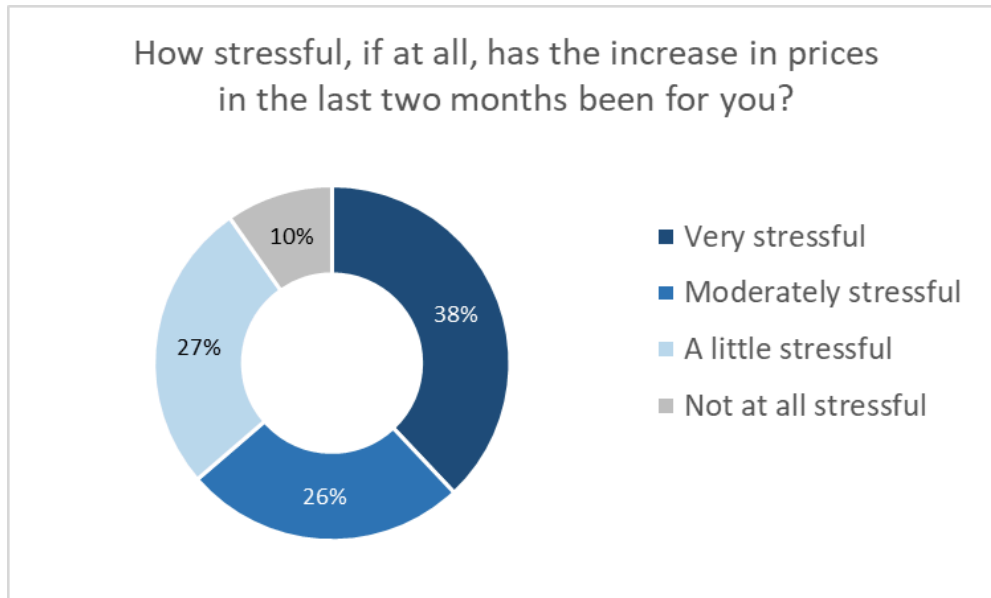
Rising inflation has exacerbated the challenges that older adults already face with making ends meet. Overall, the cost of all items in the New York City metro area has risen by 19 percent since 2021, with **the rise in food costs (22 percent) surpassing the increase in rent (18 percent) over the past four years.**⁴



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers

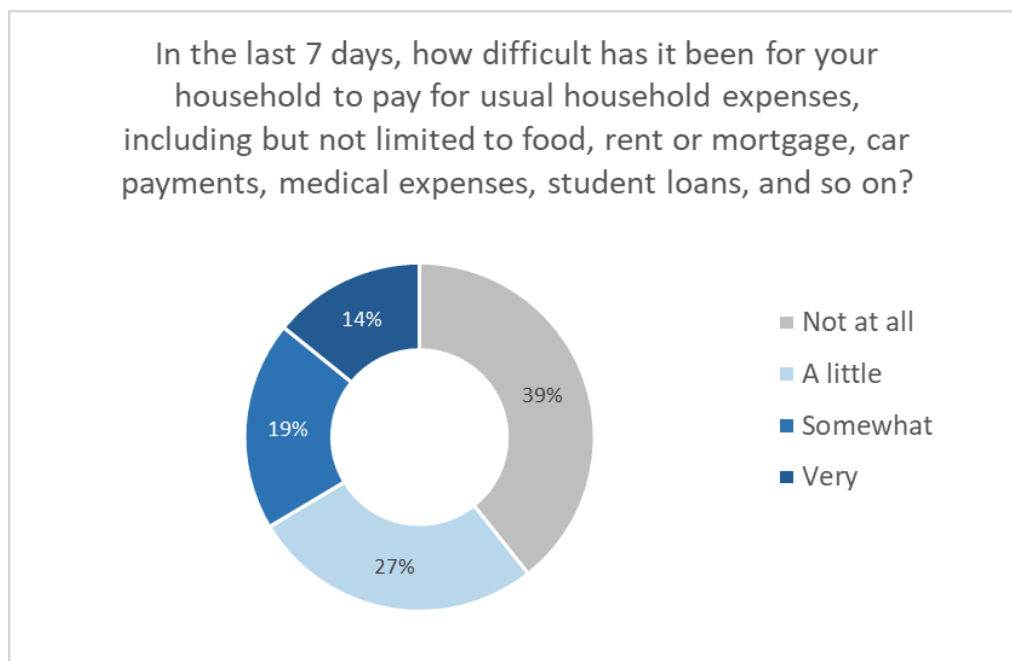
Rising inflation has created additional stress for many older adult New Yorkers. According to UNH’s analysis of 2024 data from the Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey, **64 percent of older adults in the New York City metro area reported that they were “moderately” or “very” stressed about price increases in the last two months.**

⁴ https://www.bls.gov/regions/northeast/news-release/consumerpriceindex_newyork.htm



Source: US Census Bureau, pooled Household Pulse Survey data for 2024. Chart analysis is based on a sample of nearly 6,000 older adults living in the New York City metro area. However, the Household Pulse Survey surveyed all adult households aged 18 and over, not only those with older adults.

Furthermore, **over a third of older adults in the New York City metro area reported that it was “somewhat” or “very difficult” for their household to pay for typical household expenses such as food or rent.** Rates of financial hardship are even higher among Black and Latinx older adults, with 39 percent of Black older adults and nearly half (49 percent) of Latinx older adults reporting challenges with paying for household expenses, compared to 23 percent of White older adults.



Source: US Census Bureau, pooled Household Pulse Survey data for 2024. Chart analysis is based on a sample of nearly 6,000 older adults living in the New York City metro area. However, the Household Pulse Survey surveyed all adult households aged 18 and over, not only those with older adults.

Providers report food price increases as high as 76 percent

During UNH's focus group, several settlement houses stated that food prices, especially for eggs, dairy and bread, have surged by 25 percent to as high as 76 percent, underscoring the need to increase congregate meals budgets so that they reflect higher food costs related to inflation.

One provider noted that the price of whole wheat sliced bread charged by their vendor increased from \$2.59 per loaf to \$4.55 per loaf in the past year, a 76-percent increase: "The increase is ridiculous. We serve 150 meals a day at [our] OAC. My budget is being drained dramatically. We didn't anticipate that when we did the [last] RFP."

Furthermore, some providers shared that they have limited options when it comes to food vendors, especially those able to deliver to the neighborhoods where their older adult centers are located. Settlement houses noted that while NYC Aging requires providers to follow certain nutrition standards and guidelines, including offering plant-based and vegan meals, the higher price points of healthier food options make it difficult to meet these requirements without additional funding in their budgets.

Providers are struggling to meet the demand for culturally competent meals that are aligned with the dietary preferences of a diverse older adult population

Culturally competent meals are not only essential to meet the nutritional preferences of New York City's diverse communities, they are also required in NYC Aging contracts. With rising food costs, settlement houses expressed challenges with providing nutritious culturally competent meals that align with the preferences of racially diverse communities, particularly for Asian and Latinx older adults. Challenges include sourcing appropriate ingredients that meet nutrition standards, and hiring chefs who have experience in cooking specific ethnic cuisines, such as Chinese cuisine. There are higher costs to preparing culturally specific foods, as they require certain ingredients that need to be sourced from local vendors within New York City or imported from abroad.

The tariffs imposed by the Trump administration have led to price increases for imported ingredients. A provider in Queens noted that their raw food costs have increased due to the higher cost of imported ingredients and that they are struggling to stay within budget until the end of the current fiscal year: "The ingredients [we use] are imported from South Korea...costs are going up. When I checked the balance for the raw food budget, there was not much room until the end of June." Another provider on the Lower East Side noted that they provide steamed buns for breakfast to have culturally sensitive meals for older adults, but the prices charged by local vendors in Chinatown have increased. The same provider noted that in order to comply with NYC Aging's nutrition standards, they are required to use low-sodium soy sauce, "which is double the price of regular soy sauce" and has strained their congregate meals budgets.

Providers also prefer flexibility with budget modifications so that they are better able to address community needs and preferences. One provider shared that older adults have a strong need for breakfast and requested shifting part of their congregate meal budget from lunch to breakfast, but were unable to do so.

Increase in general operating costs outside of food have strained budgets of congregate meals providers

Settlement houses shared that general operating costs for their congregate meals programs have increased and that they must find creative ways to offset these increases. One provider noted, “the [NYC Aging] budget doesn’t cover costs of running the program. We look for free resources, it’s the only way we can operate.” In addition to outdated contract budgets that do not fully cover the true cost of providing services, payments are regularly late, including so-called “advances” that arrive well into the new fiscal year. Due to late payments, many providers have been forced to take out interest-bearing loans to cover program costs. Of New York City settlement houses with a line of credit, 63 percent (15 settlement houses) said that they had to tap into their line of credit due to cash flow issues and/or late payments from City agencies.

Recommendation: The City should invest \$57 million in new funding for congregate meals at older adult centers in the FY26 budget.

To combat older adult hunger and address rising inflation, UNH recommends that the City increase food budgets at older adult centers with a \$57 million investment. The \$57 million investment would include the restoration of the \$7 million PEG (Program to Eliminate the Gap) cut to congregate older adult center meals from the FY 2024 Adopted Budget, and the inclusion of at least \$50 million to cover inflation costs. This figure is consistent with an analysis of the on-the-ground needs from UNH and our advocacy partners over the last two years, in addition to adjusting for inflation. The \$57 million investment would allow settlement house and other CBO congregate meals providers to afford higher food prices and general operating costs, to prevent future deficits, as well as continue to provide nutritious culturally competent meals that are aligned with the nutritional preferences of the City’s diverse older adult population.

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