



## INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1988, Food & Friends provides medically tailored meals and groceries and ongoing nutritional counseling to individuals living with life-challenging illnesses in DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Individuals are referred to Food & Friends services by licensed healthcare professionals, such as nurses, doctors, registered dietitians, and clinical social workers. Referral partners are an integral part of the program's framework. Between June and October 2021, the Client Services team at Food & Friends in collaboration with Riya Maheshwari, research student lead from Georgetown University, conducted a survey to gather feedback from referral partners on their experiences. After reviewing initial survey responses, Food & Friends set up interviews with three referral partners who shared their thoughts on the program's strengths and areas for improvement.

## SURVEY: KEY FINDINGS

### Referral Rates

In June 2021, Food & Friends sent a Google questionnaire to 170 referral partners. 47 individuals responded, yielding a 27.6% response rate. The partners who responded serve clients with a variety of qualifying illnesses in DC, Maryland, and Virginia. Most providers listed diabetes and renal disease as the primary illnesses served. About half of the respondents stated that they have seen an increased number of clients “needing or interested in meal-related services due to the current pandemic.” Some providers reported that lower client response rates and technological barriers have impacted their work, while others shared positive feedback on telehealth options and said that the pandemic has not interfered with how they work with clients.

About half of the respondents said they refer 0-10% of their clients to Food & Friends. About 25% of respondents said they refer 20% of their clients and 17% said they refer 30% of their clients. When asked about the most common reasons they choose to refer clients to Food & Friends, referral partners selected “home-delivered meals” and “food quality.” (Figure 1) Respondents said the most common reasons not to refer clients were that individuals either do not meet the program’s eligibility requirements or already receive necessary support from family/friends. Most referral partners have found that the patients they choose to refer are eligible (only

12.8% of respondents said they had referred a client in the last year who was found to be ineligible). Respondents stated that patients who were found to be ineligible either did not have a qualifying diagnosis or did not meet the Hgba1c requirement for diabetes patients (a1c must be > 8%).

### Application Process

When asked about potential barriers that prevent them from referring clients, referral partners cited the length of the application, the stringency of eligibility requirements, difficulty obtaining supporting documentation (for clients who are HIV+ or live in Fairfax County), and difficulty using a paper application. Some providers mentioned delays between the application and first delivery as a potential barrier. When asked about ways to improve the referral process, 53.2% of respondents supported transitioning to an online application. Additionally, 59.6% of respondents stated that they would like to receive more updates on client status.



## OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Food & Friends conducts outreach in two ways: first, by providing virtual trainings to referral partners on eligibility requirements and the intake process, and second, by sending email updates on upcoming events, trainings, and staff changes. About a third of the providers said they have recently attended a training presentation. Of those who attended, 80% said the presentation was “extremely helpful” (5) on a 1-5 scale. 91.5% of respondents said the emailed referral partner updates are helpful and that it would be beneficial to continue receiving information about new programs, upcoming events, and statistics/updates on nutrition in the community. Respondents confirmed that email is the best way to communicate this information.

### INTERVIEWS: KEY FINDINGS

After reviewing written survey responses, the Client Services team set up individual Zoom interviews with 3 referral partners in October 2021. These partners included Natalya Passe, a renal social worker at DaVita Dialysis; Diane Hazzard, a hospice social worker at Capital Caring Health; and Diana Dobbins Johnson, a nurse care manager in the MyHealthGPS program at Children’s National Medical Center. Interviewees were asked the question set below and instructed to respond freely with feedback about the program:

Interviewees were asked the question set below and instructed to respond freely with feedback about the program:

- Please confirm your name/organization/illness served/role.
- What makes Food & Friends stand out compared to other organizations and nonprofits working to combat food insecurity? Why?
- Are there other organizations that work to combat food insecurity that your organization refers more clients to? If yes, why?
- In your experience, what do other organizations working to combat food insecurity do better than Food & Friends?
- Would you say Food & Friends is well known in the community you serve?
- What services does Food & Friends currently not offer that you believe would be beneficial to our target population?
- How long have you been referring clients to Food & Friends? How have the people you refer changed over the years?
- What word or phrase comes to mind when you think of Food & Friends?



## PROGRAM STRENGTHS

The interviewees echoed the responses of other providers in the written survey. All three interviewees stated that they have seen an increased need for food assistance among their patients over time. One interviewee stated that she believes clients are more willing to accept support now than when she began referring to Food & Friends 10 years ago. Two out of the three interviewees stated that they primarily refer their patients to Food & Friends (versus other programs) for food assistance. One stated that she refers more clients to a hospital-based program that partners with patients' insurance. Interviewees stated that it is much easier to refer clients to the program than to government-based food assistance. All three interviewees said that Food & Friends stands out among other organizations for its home-delivered meal services and food quality, and because its services are completely free to clients. They believe the program is well-known in the community but by design serves a narrower population than other food-based non-profits, such as Mom's Meals, Bread for the City, or Meals on Wheels. Overall, interviewees spoke highly of the program. In response to the final question that asked what word or phrase comes to mind when they think of the program, the interviewees responded "convenient," "reliable," and "caring: [the program] does good in the community."

## PROGRAM AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Interviewees offered various suggestions for increasing accessibility and ease of application. First, they requested clearer guidance on the service area and supporting documentation requirements for specific illnesses. Written survey responses demonstrated this need as well: 72.3% of respondents said they are aware that Food & Friends does not have an income requirement and 66% said they are aware that Food & Friends does not have a waitlist. Second, they suggested that an electronic application may be more accessible than the paper version. Third, one provider stated that adding more variety to menu selections would be beneficial. Finally, the providers said it would be helpful to review who to contact to follow up on the status of referrals or to pause service when clients are out of town, etc.

***72.3% of respondents said they are aware that Food & Friends does not have an income requirement***

***66% of respondents said they are aware that Food & Friends does not have a waitlist***

## PROGRAM STRENGTHS

In both the written survey responses and Zoom interviews, referral partners shared positive feedback and demonstrated that they value the quality and range of services offered by Food & Friends. They offered suggestions for improvement, primarily requesting clarity on the service map (for ex. grocery-only regions), guidance on supporting documentation for specific illnesses, and communication throughout the referral process about client status. In the section below, we offer strategies to improve in each of these areas:

1. New website: Since the 2021 Referral Partner Project was conducted, Food & Friends has launched a new website, which includes the following tools that we believe will aid referral partners and clients:
  - a. Routing map tool: Under “Services” --> “How to get meals” --> “Where we serve,” providers can search specific patient addresses to verify that they fall within our service area. We have also clarified information on grocery vs meal delivery areas in our referral partner training presentations.
  - b. Current menu offerings: Under “Services” --> “Current Clients” --> “Current Menus,” referral partners and clients can explore current GTG and HDM menus. These menus rotate once per week on a 6-week cycle. Additionally, under “Nutrition Education,” clients can view information about upcoming events like GTG focus groups where they can provide direct feedback to the Nutrition Services team. Over time, the Nutrition Services team uses this feedback to adapt menus.

- c. Referral Partner FAQs and Online Intake Form: Under “Services” --> “Intake Forms,” referral partners can view a list of FAQs. These provide guidance on the service area, eligibility requirements, and who to contact with questions about services. Further down on this page, providers can download a fillable PDF version of the intake form.

2. Online Referral Partner Portal: In the coming months, Food & Friends will launch an online referral partner portal that will allow providers to directly enter information into the Client Track database, making it possible to refer clients completely electronically.

3. Communication: Food & Friends has solidified the intake workflow so that providers receive a confirmation email upon referral receipt (stating whether the client is eligible, ineligible, or more information is required) AND a confirmation email when the client receives their first delivery. These steps have fostered smoother communication between referral partners and the Food & Friends team.



## APPENDIX

Adolescent Health Center at Children's Hospital Center

AIDS Healthcare Foundation

Ambulatory Case Management at Children's National Hospital

Anna Healthcare

Arlington Free Clinic

Bayada Home Health Care

Capital Caring Health

Capital Caring Health

CCI Health & Wellness Services

Charles County Department of Health

Children's National Hospital

DaVita Dialysis - George Washington University SE

DaVita Dialysis - Mt. Rainer

DaVita Dialysis - Takoma Park

DaVita Dialysis - Wheaton

Fresenius Kidney Care

George Washington Medical Faculty Associates

George Washington University Cancer Center

George Washington University Hospital

Georgetown Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center

HIV Clinic at Children's National Hospital

Howard University Cancer Center

Inova Schar Cancer Institute

Kaiser Permanente

La Clínica del Pueblo

Maryland Oncology Hematology

Medstar Health Home Care

MedStar Washington Hospital Center

Meritus Health

Montgomery County Health and Human Services - Aging and Disability

Resource Unit

Montgomery Department of Health & Human Services

Sibley Memorial Hospital

United Healthcare

Unity Health Care

VHO, Inc. – Nexus Program

Virginia Cancer Specialists

Whitman-Walker Health