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MEALS ON WHEELS

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The September issue of the *National Food Review* examined Government food programs available to senior citizens. However, a number of private volunteer programs also exist which assist elderly and incapacitated people. While the influence of these efforts on total food consumption is minimal, they are important for the many Americans who lack the mobility or financial capability to provide their own meals.

One such program is Meals-on-Wheels. This program will be celebrating its 25th anniversary of operation in the United States in 1979. The primary objective of this loose confederation of "kitchens" is to provide meals to people who are unable to serve themselves. A substantial portion of its recipients are over age 60, but some are younger people who cannot prepare their own meals.

Scope of Projects

Each Meals-on-Wheels project operates its own program and is generally affiliated with a religious or community organization. The total number of such Meals-on-Wheels units is difficult to estimate because there is no over-

all coordinating effort. The International Directory of Meals-on-Wheels has about 800 U.S. listings which, according to volunteer spokesmen, may be about half the number of total kitchens. Thus, it appears that there are between 1,500 and 2,000 Meals-on-Wheels kitchens in the United States.

Meals-on-Wheels and the Older Americans Act of 1965

Meals-on-Wheels is sometimes confused with home-delivered meals served under the Older Americans Act of 1965. The original purpose of the Act was to provide meals served in a single location, but has since been expanded to serve the elderly who cannot attend congregate settings. The 1978 amendments to the Act authorized \$80 million to be spent on home-delivered meals, but dropped a provision emphasizing Meals-on-Wheels. However, the language of the legislation is such that Meals-on-Wheels kitchens, if they so desire, can qualify for some funds.

There are differences, however, between the two programs. Meals-on-Wheels is a private organization and relies on volunteer help. Meals served under the Older Americans Act are Government sponsored and financed. In addition, Meals-on-Wheels has no age requirement. Recipients under

the Older Americans Act must be age 60 or over.

The number of people served varies from project to project. In a city, the typical area is about 20 blocks. Small towns and rural areas make up a significant portion of Meals-on-Wheels kitchen units. But since such areas have low density populations, kitchens in these areas are limited in the total number of people they serve. Overall, a random sample indicates that each unit serves between 30 and 50 recipients. Thus, it appears that between 50 and 100,000 incapacitated Americans are being served by this program.

Food Service

Meals-on-Wheels program recipients pay between \$10 and \$14 per week for 10 meals—one hot and one cold per day which are delivered at the same time. Each meal is prepared to meet nutrition requirements. Recipients pay for the cost of the food, but not administrative or delivery costs. The bulk of all meals served are purchased from caterers and in some instances from hospitals and other institutions. A number of Meals-on-Wheels kitchens, especially in the rural areas, still serve home-prepared foods. Some units provide specialized meals, such as kosher food and restricted diets.

Usually two volunteers make the deliveries—a driver and a jumper who actually delivers the meals. In addition to delivering meals, volunteers often look after the overall needs of the elderly.