

Dining Programs in Senior Communities Require a Fresh Approach



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Dining Programs in Senior Communities Require a Fresh Approach

The Competitive Advantage

Senior communities are competing for health care and private pay dollars in an increasingly competitive marketplace. As an administrator in senior services, your approach to dining services has a major impact on the level of success you achieve. At one extreme, a poorly run dining program can cause illness, threaten the health of residents or result in loss of licensing and accreditation. More commonly, it will affect resident satisfaction, state inspection ratings, and may even result in resident defections to other nearby facilities with a reputation for better food. Bad food can even undermine the reputation of a facility with an otherwise good reputation for health care services.

In our experience, senior services administrators are truly committed to providing quality health care services to the seniors in their facility, so in a marketplace where prospective residents have a choice, the quality and distinctive characteristics of the dining program may be the key differentiator that provides a competitive advantage. This advantage can manifest itself in several different categories, including marketing potential (attracting new business), resident satisfaction (keeping existing business), and meeting business objectives (managing the business).

So, what does fresh food have to do with it?

“Circle of Success”

In 2010, Unidine published a white paper that first described what we called the “Circle of Success.” Our survey of 65 senior services executives revealed a clear pattern in dining programs that were



Figure 1.

considered successful. The three components common to top performing dining programs included “Fresh Food”, “Choice” and “Enhanced Service.”

In this white paper, we look more closely at Fresh Food and how it affects the success of a senior services facility with a focus on related issues that might impact occupancy rates. Specifically, we’ll look at how fresh food is defined, the impact of fresh food on different aspects of senior care and different approaches to measuring the effects of dining program improvements on senior communities.

Along the way, we’ll point out how you can begin to address the challenge of fresh food today and in the future through the “Mapping Your Success” side-bar features you will find throughout this report.

What is Fresh Food?

Before we continue, “Fresh Food” is a term that requires further clarification. Does fresh food mean a prepackaged meal that is fresh out of the oven? Does it mean that you have prepared a fresh meal from pre-cut, frozen or canned ingredients? Or does it mean that everything in the meal is prepared from fresh ingredients. Are the “fresh” ingredients locally sourced?

To make the concept more manageable, consider fresh food as a continuum and not a “yes” or “no” as depicted in Figure 2. Your goal is to step up from “Heat and Eat” on the left towards scratch cooked meals made to order with the finest seasonal and, where possible, organic and locally sourced ingredients on the right.

Mapping Your Success

Fresh Food Audit

A Fresh Food Audit assesses an organization’s position along the Fresh Food Continuum. It is also useful as a periodic check-up to ensure policies are enforced.

Examples of questions include:

- *Are canned items used as ingredients in the salad bar?*
- *Are frozen, pre-cut vegetables used as ingredients in recipes?*
- *Are soups made from bases or from home-made stocks?*
- *Are salad dressings made fresh?*
- *Are prepared foods stored in steam carts or heating carts and for how long?*
- *Are meals finished table-side prior to being served?*
- *Where does fresh produce come from?*

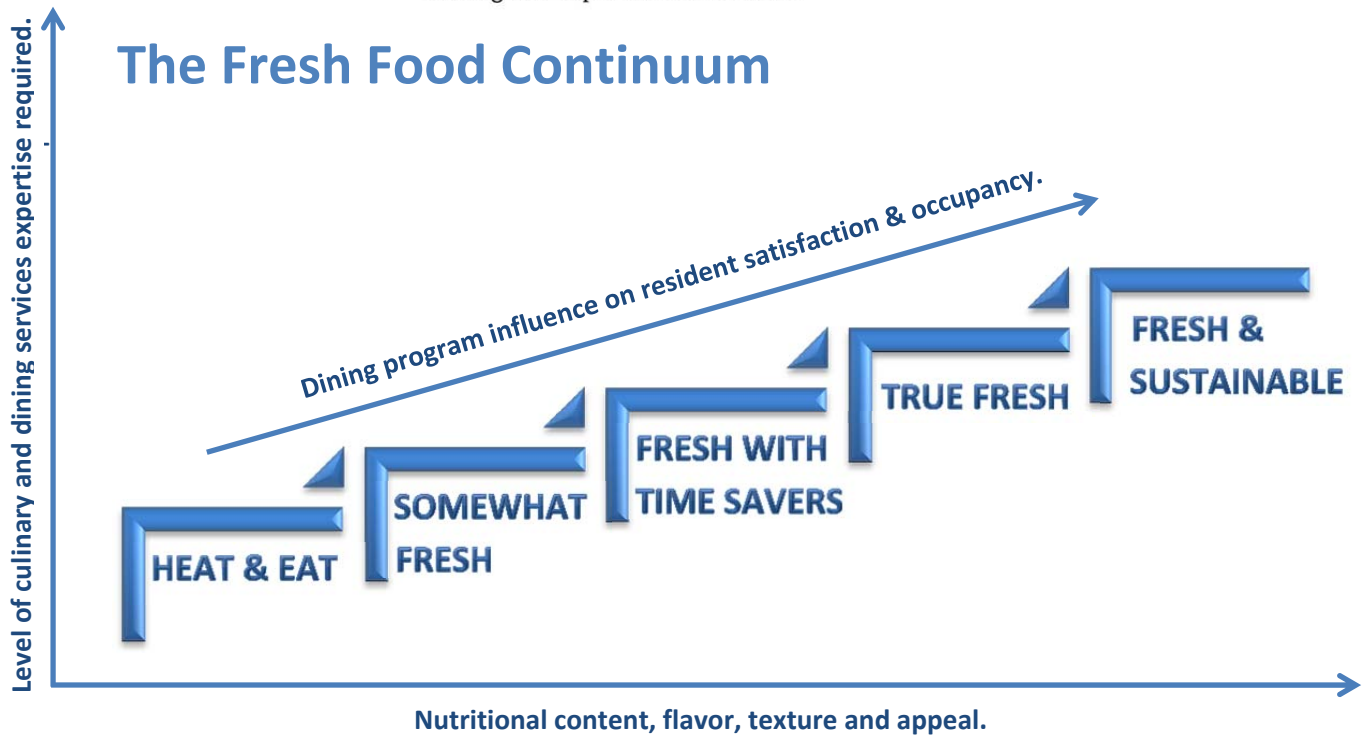


Figure 2.

Each step to the right along this continuum improves the nutritional content, flavor, texture and appeal of the food. Each step up increases the level of skill required by the staff that prepare the meals. And each step elevates the influence of your dining program on resident satisfaction and occupancy goals in your facility.

To promote a better understanding of fresh food, Unidine Corporation developed a "Fresh Food Audit" that is used when we are asked to develop a baseline assessment of a facility. The Fresh Food Audit is a comprehensive checklist that examines everything from the ingredients used in the meals to preparation and presentation of the meal.

The questions are not all related to the ingredients, but address elements of Procurement, Preparation and Presentation – what we call the "3 Ps" of a fresh food approach.

Usually, the process is an eye-opener. When you actually take the time to look at what is in your freezer, your refrigerator and what is stored on your shelves, and you consider how these ingredients

are used to make the food that is served to your residents, you find that your meals are not as fresh as you might think!

Where Do You See the Effects of Fresh Food?

Advancement along the Fresh Food Continuum offers many benefits, which may be grouped into different categories, including:

- Health & wellness objectives
- Resident satisfaction objectives
- Business objectives
- Marketing objectives

Health & Wellness Objectives

Does using fresh ingredients versus frozen or canned really make a difference? According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture Nutrient Data Library, the answer is “yes.” Take, for instance, carrots. According to the Nutrient Data Library, the calorie count in 100 grams of fresh carrots is 41kcal. In the same amount of frozen carrots, the calorie count drops to 36kcal – a loss of approximately 12%. A comparable portion of canned carrots contains 25kcal – almost 40% less than their fresh counterparts. Figure 3 illustrates the degradation in nutritional value in protein, carbohydrates, potassium and Vitamin C as well. This isn’t the full list, but it is representative of the full picture. The complete comparison and comparisons of a wide variety of foods can be found online at the following url:

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/foodcomp/search/>.

Mapping Your Success

Food First

Often, seniors find themselves taking multi-vitamin and mineral supplements, drinking high calorie, high protein supplements and relying on medications to promote bowel regularity. A “Food First” philosophy is a more natural approach to addressing these needs. It starts with fresh, high quality ingredients and uses preparation techniques that preserve nutrition, flavor, texture and visual appeal.

As a result, seniors find their dining experience more enjoyable and increase their intake of nutrient-rich food. Residents receive their daily calories, protein, vitamins, minerals and fiber without – or with only minimal – use of supplements, diuretics and medication to support regularity.

A successful program is built on close collaboration of the dietitian and chef to plan meals that incorporate nutritional requirements into menu selections and ensure that the residents’ dietary needs are always met.

This approach also supports new liberalized diets that address chronic conditions, reduce sodium and fat, yet improve quality of life and empower seniors with greater choice and more flavorful options.

Nutritional Content of Fresh Carrots vs. Processed

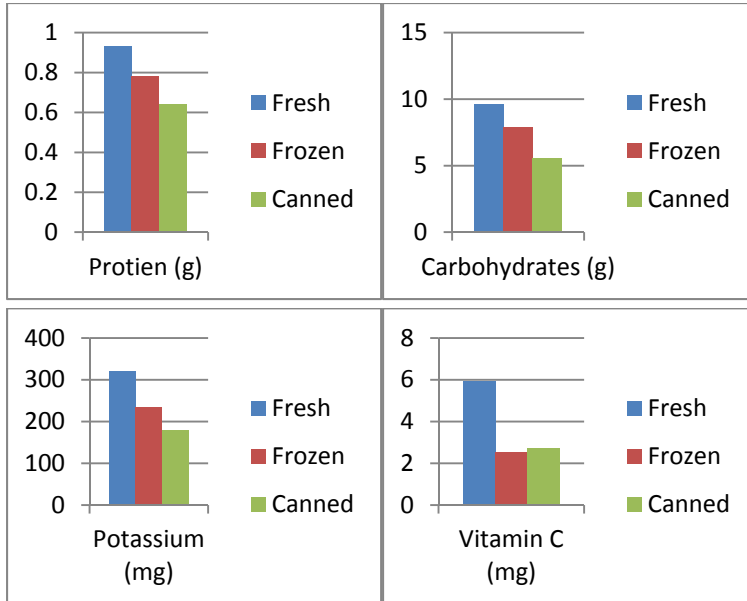


Figure 3.

In addition to retaining nutritional value, meals made from fresh ingredients just taste better. Fresh ingredients retain more of their flavor and release more appetizing aromas. So not only do residents eat more and waste less, the food that they eat is more nutritious.

Another important consideration that supports the use of fresh ingredients and scratch made meals is control over the amount of sodium and added sugar in the diets of residents. Processed foods often contain added sodium or sugar, and skew nutritional calculations for recipes.

Resident Satisfaction Objectives

Resident satisfaction is a critical area of concern for all senior services administrators, and although there are many factors that contribute to resident satisfaction, few have as big an impact as food in areas from personal enjoyment to wellness and social interaction. Advancement along the Fresh Food Continuum is a tool that many administrators are using to elevate the dining experience in their community and improve resident satisfaction



scores. This is particularly important at a time when enhanced transparency makes resident satisfaction information widely available for comparison by prospective residents and their families.

In facilities that rely in whole or in part on private pay dollars, the menu can become an important part of the value proposition. Seniors and family members who are investing their hard earned dollars to provide a high standard of retirement living will have higher expectations and be that much more difficult to satisfy. Advancing along the fresh food continuum can help bridge the gap between resident expectations and their actual dining experience.



In a society where meals are social events that bring together family and friends, fresh food is more than good nutrition. Meals become a focal point of conversation, an opportunity for shared enjoyment and an educational opportunity to engage the mind. Fresh meals made from scratch with fresh ingredients have more flavor, especially when prepared by trained, experienced culinary experts. When combined with attentive, caring service and the empowering effect of increased choice, resident satisfaction with the dining program will increase.

Business Objectives

Senior facilities have endured a challenging economic environment in recent years. Food and energy prices have been particularly volatile, and high food prices are expected to last for the foreseeable future. To meet business objectives, operating efficiency will continue to be of primary importance, and dining programs offer some interesting opportunities.

In our experience, fresh food reduces waste and also reduces the use of supplements as residents consume more of their meals. The reduced use of supplements can contribute to significant savings and off-set some of the increases associated with food inflation. A skilled and experienced dining service director or

executive chef can reduce procurement costs through proper planning, avoiding over-purchasing(which increases waste), under-purchasing (which reduces leverage), or spoilage (through meal planning and rotation of inventory).

In a true sustainable fresh food program, little goes to waste. Left over ingredients are used to make fresh cooking stock, eliminating the need to purchase stocks and soup bases. Cooking oil may be recycled in fuel programs. Use of regional and seasonal menus enables you to buy fresh, local produce when it is most affordable. And use of fresh ingredients minimizes the cost of disposing of metal, plastic and cardboard packaging materials.

Marketing Objectives

A high quality fresh food program can be instrumental in efforts to improve occupancy rates. In a crowded marketplace, the dining program is a point of differentiation that can be highlighted in brochures, advertisements and articles in local publications. The dining program can be featured in community outreach efforts, open houses, facility tours and other activities that offer opportunities for prospective residents and family members to sample the quality of the food and experience your commitment to service.

Fresh Food Dining Programs Influence Occupancy

So how do fresh food dining programs influence occupancy rates in senior communities? In preparation for this white paper, Unidine surveyed 38 senior executives at senior facilities about their position along the fresh food continuum and their perceptions as to how the dining program influenced occupancy. The feedback was revealing.

The dining program did not play a role in the marketing programs of only three of the facilities we surveyed. In every other case, food and dining programs were prominently featured in facility

Referral Sources

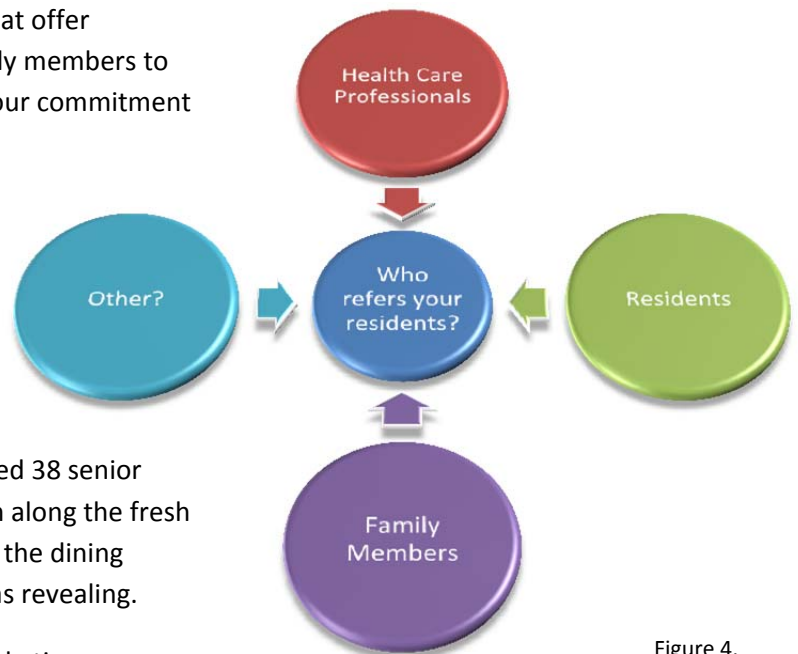


Figure 4.

tours, on web sites, in brochures and in community outreach. The majority of these facilities reported specific and measurable effects on occupancy as a result, from improved resident retention to increased tour to close ratios, more inquiries and a greater ability to entice residents to switch from competing facilities.

However, leveraging your fresh food program to improve occupancy rates requires more than placing a picture of happy diners on your web site. Careful consideration should be given to your marketplace. Do your referrals come from other health care professionals? From word-of-mouth referrals? From advertising and website traffic? From community outreach programs? Or from somewhere completely different?

Armed with an understanding of your marketplace, you can leverage your dining program to highlight the issues that are of greatest concern to each audience and to target the communication channels frequented by each audience.

Are health care professionals likely to search the web for local long-term care options for one of their patients? More likely, they are familiar with all of the facilities in the region. But are they aware of the improvement to resident satisfaction and dining satisfaction surveys brought about by your commitment to fresh food? When was the last time they were invited to a tour and a meal at your facility? Do you encourage residents to invite guests for dinner and make it easy for them to share information with their friends and family? How do you differentiate yourself from other facilities in the region in ads and brochures? Can your fresh food program demonstrate not only that your residents have an exceptional dining experience, but that your facility takes a cutting edge approach to health and wellness and a leadership role in diet education? Does your dining program include premium menus for private pay independent and assisted living residents that substantiate the residents' significant investment?

Mapping Your Success



Community events like this “Taste of Metrowest” event in suburban Boston provide an opportunity for the public to experience the quality of your community’s food and service.

“Our partnership with Unidine has given us the ability to increase our marketing presence in the community. There is an entire team behind us who understand that our success and theirs are intertwined.”

*Sister Jeanette Lindsay
Executive Director
Carmel Terrace*

Conclusion

This white paper discusses important issues that will help you to understand how your current dining program either supports or undermines your commitment to high quality senior care. If you are looking for a strategy with the potential to impact many of the challenges you face every day, consider your position along the fresh food continuum. A change in approach can affect a range of objectives related to health and wellness, resident satisfaction, business and marketing.

As you consider the issue, it is important to remember that fresh food is not an all or nothing commitment. Improvements along the continuum – from any starting position to any end point – will have beneficial effects. As you develop your strategy, keep in mind that each step along the fresh food continuum increases the level of culinary and dining services expertise required to succeed. If, however, you do not have the infrastructure or resources to implement such a strategy, you have options. You can choose to build these capabilities within your organization either on your own or with the help of a consultant, or you can turn to a food service management company that specializes in senior services and fresh food dining programs.

We hope that you have enjoyed this report and find it useful. If you have questions, we invite you to speak with a Unidine representative who will be happy to answer any questions you have about the information offered in this report or about the programs we offer to deliver senior dining programs that will set your apart.

About Unidine

Unidine Corporation was founded in 2001 by Richard B. Schenkel, an industry visionary whose background in food and service management in the healthcare industry spans nearly three decades. Unidine delivers customized food and dining programs that reflect our passion for food and service, improve resident satisfaction, optimize operations and control costs.

Unidine currently serves over 130 clients across the United States. We have earned a reputation for culinary excellence, customer service and innovation that extends from our dining programs to our management systems. Our low account-to-management ratio ensures quick access to senior executives and responsiveness to client needs.

Call Unidine today to see how our custom programs and commitment to delicious food and customer service can help you to elevate the dining experience in your independent or assisted living facility, skilled nursing facility, or CCRC.

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