



“DISHING IT OUT” THE BOHSE WAY:

Evaluating Quality, Performance, and Customer Satisfaction in Food Service Programs

Is the organization meeting the needs and desires of the customers? They want great food and good service in a clean facility with caring staff. Is the program meeting the expectations of the funder? Funders want the required units of services and /or meals delivered and the program participant to be very satisfied.

Program operations are often defined within a contract, requiring a certain level of performance or units of service, adherence to regulatory standards such as those outlined in the Older Americans Act or state standards, health department sanitation requirements, and bid specifications. It is important to use or develop tools to regularly evaluate program performance and customer service. For example, a contract requires serving a certain number of meals. The number of meals served and to whom is reliably collected and recorded. This information may be processed electronically and software performs statistical reports as needed. Program adjustments should be made accordingly to keep service levels on track.

Programs are driven by revenue sources that are often limited. Expenses are sometimes out of our control. Keep a constant eye on program revenue and expenses and participant income. Compare the actual dollar amounts with those budgeted and strive for balance, acknowledging that some revenue and expense items only come once a year. Always plan to have contingency funding sources for unforeseen events such as the replacement or repair of major equipment or vehicle or facility repairs. Be watchful for surpluses if it means losing unspent funds or jeopardizing future funding allocations.

Constant monitoring of the food services requires trained personnel such as a dietitian or diet technician or food service manager. A dietitian may perform monitoring on a consulting basis. Food safety is of paramount importance as most of those we serve, older adults, are vulnerable to the ravages of food born illness. The frequency of monitoring the kitchen is often dependent on the size of the operation and the availability of professionals to conduct the visit. Other staff may be responsible for the daily monitoring and recording of refrigeration and meal temperatures.

Besides attention to food safety, monitoring of the food service also includes checking inventory and product usage against production, checking invoices against actual deliveries, ensuring consistent food preparation against standardized recipes, ensuring correct portion control, and ensuring correct assembly of meals for regular and special diets. Likewise, menus are evaluated to ensure that they are in compliance with program requirements and bid specifications.

All the evaluations and monitoring is useless unless there is effective follow-up. Most funders expect to see written documentation of monitoring and evaluation activities. This would include a description of the problem, what needs to be done by whom and when, and confirmation that the problem was corrected.

When it comes to the customer who is receiving the meal, she/he has his or her own ideas about food. Satisfying the increasingly diverse food culture in the communities served and individual preferences or special dietary needs can be an intimidating task. Providing customers the opportunity to give input on the meal service and self-evaluating the service is key to promoting satisfaction. Survey questions should address experiences with food, the service, dining ambiance, and staff interaction. The two major sources of satisfaction, food and ambiance, must be measured independently. Researchers found that the best predictor of overall satisfaction was satisfaction with meal presentation, taste, and coldness of the food (cold foods that were cold enough). Besides regular surveys on food quality, customer satisfaction requires a watchful eye by a manager during the meal service, easy access to the manager, and the opportunity for program participants to assist in the menu planning process.

Program operations depend on personnel who take responsibility for doing a good job and supporting the mission of the organization. All employees, but especially those who have contact with the customer, must know their needs, be attentive, and have a good attitude and interpersonal skills. It is important to conduct regular performance evaluations for staff and volunteers. It can promote improvement for the betterment of the individual and the program or weed out the bad apple. As JW Marriott said “It takes happy employees to make happy customers”. Be sure your employees are happy and doing the right thing.

Resources:

A sample monitoring tool, “Senior Community Café Inspection Form” is provided from Douglas Buck, PhD, Nutritionist, Connecticut Department of Social Services Aging Services, Hartford, CT.

AoA has released the results of a two-year evaluation study of the Elderly Nutrition Program (Title III-C and Title VI of the Older Americans Act), which was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. http://www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/nutrition/program_eval/program_eval.aspx

National Senior Center Self Assessment and National Accreditation Manual and CD. <https://www.ncoa.org/content.cfm?sectionID=30> This is a manual and CD based on the standards developed by the National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC).