

St. Luke's Older Adult Meal Program Is a Big Hit among Seniors

By Sam Kennedy

LEHIGH VALLEY - Even a frigid cold day in January after a near-record snow couldn't stop area senior citizens from heading to St. Luke's Anderson Campus in Northampton County for their evening meal.

"The food is delicious, but the main reason we come is the people," said retired physician Ralph Shields of Bethlehem. "The friends. We have friends we get to see here all the time."

His wife, Jean Soloi, was a bit more focused on the food. "Do they have a good dessert," she asked. "I have to get it first."

Dozens of senior citizens turn out every weekday night to the cafeterias at 10 St. Luke's campuses to take advantage of the Older Adult Meal Program.

Over at Geisinger St. Luke's Hospital in Orwigsburg, Schuylkill County, 85-year-old Clem Utara from nearby Deer Lake goes 4-5 times a week depending on the menu, and gets there early to save seats for five friends so they can all sit together.

"The food is good," he said. "The ambiance here, the people, the staff, it just feels nice. I look forward to it, and to seeing everyone."

For just \$3.99, adults 65-and-over receive a nutritious and healthy meal that includes an entree, a soup or salad, a side dish, vegetable, dessert and a 12-ounce drink. All the meals are prepared fresh daily, and many of the ingredients are grown at the St. Luke's Rodale Institute Organic Farm, a 14-acre area that grows more than 70 varieties of about 30 types of produce.

St. Luke's began the Older Adult Meal Program in 2017, one component of a broader Senior Health Program committed to helping older adults stay as healthy and independent as long as possible.

According to a study in JAMA, the Journal of the American Medical Association, about one-third of older adults reported feeling lonely or a felt a lack of companionship, with that percentage raising the lower their income. Loneliness and social isolation increased the mortality rate by more than 25%.

"This initiative addresses many of the needs outlined in our 2025 Community Health Need Assessment comprehensively – from access, healthy fresh food, to building companionship for community development," said Rajika E. Reed, Ph.D., MPH, M.Ed., Vice President of Community Health for St. Luke's. "Along with the adults participating in the meal program, our partners in the community have been overwhelming positive about the benefits of this program, as it serves our senior population – a group frequently missed."

The Older Adult Meal Program, providing affordable nutritious meals along with social contact, exemplifies the unique culture that has made St. Luke's the top-ranked health care system in the country. In 2025, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ranked St. Luke's #1 ahead of Houston Methodist and Mayo Clinic as the nation's top health system for quality, safety and patient experience—an objective recognition reaffirming St. Luke's preeminent position as a leader among the largest and most respected health care providers in the country.

"The food is good and it's good company, but it's a great value," said Butch Cutrona of Plainfield Township, who was there with his partner, Theresa. While often it's the relatively low price of the meals that initially draws people, it's the quality and camaraderie that keeps them coming back.

"My daughter-in-law told me about this a long time ago," Theresa Rothrock said. "I never really thought about coming until one of the friends I have breakfast with said she was coming, so we came. That was two years ago, and we've been coming ever since."

Theresa said that the friends they meet make the evening meals special. She and Butch attend almost every weeknight. "We sit with our friends and we laugh so much," she said. "People say they want to sit at our table because we're having so much fun."

Ralph and Jean said they attend two or three nights a week. He is a retired St. Luke's family practice internal medicine doctor, the middle of a three-generation chain of St. Luke's doctors starting with his father and now his son.

Ian Russell, the general manager for Dietary Administration at the Anderson Campus, said they serve 60-100 Older Adult meals every day, averaging 63 meals per weekday over the last year. The Warren (NJ) Campus led the way by averaging 80 meals per weekday.

"We get a big crowd, about 20-30 who are regulars every day," he said. "Some of them get here well before we are ready to serve at 4 o'clock."

Sally Boyer, a Nutrition Services aide, is the shining star for the seniors on Wednesday nights. She knows everyone's name and everyone asks her what's being served before they get to the dinner line.

Hours vary a bit from campus to campus for the Older Adult meals, but they are served on weekdays Monday through Friday.



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