



For those who receive — and deliver — Meals on Wheels, more than nutrition is on the menu



JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Vito LaMura makes a Meals on Wheels delivery to Sally Neale in Lexington.

By [Robert Weisman](#)

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LEXINGTON — It's a Tuesday ritual that Vito LaMura holds dear.

On that day, the 71-year-old retired teacher drives from his Bedford home to Lexington Community Center, where he picks up more than a dozen Meals on Wheels packages. LaMura carefully lays out the bagged containers in his Mazda hatchback. Then he's off on an 8-mile route — delivering food to housebound seniors who get by on Social Security, daily routines, and memories.

The modest meals are crucial for those who receive them. So is the emotional nourishment. The state and federally funded Meals on Wheels program provides a daily visit for about 75,000 people over age 60 in Massachusetts. Many are hungry, isolated, and living in or near poverty. It's a human connection to an outside world that can recede from view in later years. Many Meals on Wheels volunteers are retirees like LaMura. Some aren't that much younger than the folks they visit. But most of them are focused on navigating their routes rather than peering into what could be their future. As he makes his rounds, it's clear the program benefits LaMura as much as it does the recipients, whom he calls "my people." Their conversations come easily.

LaMura points to a house where he used to bring meals.

"The woman who lived there just died," he says.

LaMura plans to go to the wake to meet her children. "I want to tell them how much I enjoyed their mother," he says.

Lexington is a mostly affluent town, but LaMura knows its less fortunate neighborhoods and their invisible pockets of loneliness.

Pulling up in front of a low-slung ranch house, he removes two trays from his car: a hot lunch and a frozen supper. They're for Sally Neale, a 75-year-old retiree who lives alone. Neale, a breast cancer survivor who has multiple sclerosis, rises gingerly from her stuffed chair with her walker when LaMura arrives. Her face brightens when she greets him.

"I'm playing Scrabble with myself," Neale says.

"Who's winning?" LaMura asks playfully.

"Me," she says.

LaMura places her meals on the kitchen counter. They're prepared by a contractor under nutritional guidelines set by the state Executive Office of Elder Affairs, which regulates everything from the calorie range to the fat content. On this day, lunch is white bean chicken chili, brown rice, and vegetables, along with milk, corn bread, and chocolate pudding.

Ushering her visitors into the living room, Neale shows off her collection of prize ribbons from cat shows around the region. Neale raised Siamese cats for years, chauffeuring them to show halls as far away as Maine and New York state. "The cats really enjoyed the rides," she says jokingly. There's talk of her one day getting another pet. But for now, she says, "I'm catless."

Neale, a lifelong Lexington resident, says she was the first black woman to work in the flight control tower at Hanscom Field in neighboring Bedford. She recalls watching jazz pianist Count Basie play at the officers club at Hanscom Air Force Base. Neale bought her small home for about \$3,000 in the 1970s. When the federal government needed the land to expand Minute Man National Historical Park, she had the house moved across town to its current site.

She tells a guest how LaMura once tried to fix her broken radio. When he was unable to get it working, he bought a replacement and gave it to her as a Christmas gift. "He's my godfather," she says with a smile. "He takes good care of me."

LaMura volunteers for Minuteman Senior Services, a nonprofit providing services ranging from bill-paying assistance to Medicare counseling in 16 towns north and west of Boston. It's one of 26 community aging-service groups tasked decades ago by the Legislature with managing home-call programs such as Meals on Wheels.

Under the 1965 Older Americans Act, the US government spends about \$1.4 billion a year on Meals on Wheels, a funding level that's hardly changed for years, even as an estimated 10,000 people across the United States turn 65 each day. The US Census projects that by 2030, more than 60 million Americans will fall into the 66-to-84 age bracket.

Today, about 2.4 million people receive Meals on Wheels services.

Federal funding for the program isn't enough to meet the demand, so community groups like Minuteman raise additional money from charities, corporations, and individuals. "If we didn't do that, we'd have hundreds of people on a waiting list right now," says Patti Dubielak, the group's development director.

They also track data, such as the number of meals provided to seniors returning home from hospitals, to show potential donors the "concrete benefits" of the program, Dubielak says.

Those statistics can't capture the intangible benefits of interaction with someone like LaMura, who tools around town wearing blue jeans and a baseball cap. He retired in 2007, after spending years teaching American history and geography in the Lexington public schools. As a younger man, he taught school in Paris and Aruba and was a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco.

"I have to give back to feel good about myself," he says. "Most of these people are living by themselves. Most of them are vulnerable in one way or another. So we want to make sure they're OK. People want to age at home, but that can be isolating unless you have the right network. For a lot of these people, the Meals on Wheels person is one of the only people they see all day."

At some homes along his route, grown children or caregivers answer the door. At others, English isn't spoken and the residents simply wave to LaMura as he hands them a meal tray.

He stops at a Cape Cod-style house to pay a visit to Joseph and Alma Ballota. Joe is 95, and Alma 92. They married in 1949, bought their house in 1952, and have lived there ever since. Joe, an Army medic during World War II, later worked for the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Alma worked for a bank, Lexington Trust Co.

They are lucky to have a son who lives in Billerica and visits regularly. Joe is legally blind and uses a walker. Alma still drives, but only to a nearby supermarket. “The thing about Meals on Wheels is we wouldn’t starve without it,” she says, “but we’d eat a lot more scrambled eggs.”

Joe is thankful for the support of his wife. “Here’s my right hand, right here,” he says, pointing to Alma. Sun streams into the room through a stained-glass window, a relic from the home in Dorchester where Joe grew up. He looks up at LaMura. He is grateful.

“We look forward to seeing Vito,” Joe says. “It’s nice to see a smiling face.”

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