

## **TIPS ON STARTING OR CONVERTING TO A REUSABLE TRAY PROGRAM**

### **OVERVIEW**

Disposable trays have long provided a flexible means of delivering nutritious meals at an affordable short-term cost. As a programs' long term financial planning becomes more sophisticated and the environmental impact of disposables are taken into account, however, re-usable trays become more attractive.

With a little investigation you will find that starting a returnable tray program is relatively simple, it can save you lots of money, it will minimize the environmental impact of your program, and your clients will love the improved look of everything you serve them. Our customers often tell us that complaints about food declined when they started using REusable Trays because the food looks so much more appetizing.

### **GETTING STARTED**

You can start a REusable Tray program in a way that fits your situation. You may convert your entire operation at once, or use a meal site by meal site approach. We have found that both approaches can work equally well, with the choice generally depending on your finances, the training needs of your staff and volunteers, and the logistics of your particular program.

Basically, a REusable tray program is the same as any meals on wheels program, with just a couple of differences.

Each day, when your meals are delivered to the home, the delivery person will pick up the previous day's REusable Tray to return it to the kitchen for sanitizing. You should encourage your clients to rinse or wash the tray, but it still needs sanitizing before re-use.

Let's take a look at some of the things you need to begin.

First, you will need a supply of REusable Trays. The exact number will depend on whether your delivery people return the previous day's trays to the kitchen on the same day they make the deliveries. Assuming they do, we recommend purchasing enough trays for approximately 2¼ times the number of meals delivered per day. This gives you trays for two day's deliveries plus extras for program expansion and whatever losses you might have over the course of time.

Except for very small programs, sanitizing the returned trays will require a commercial dishwasher at each site where washing occurs.

Since you should not mix the meals and the previous day's trays, each delivery person will need a container for yesterday's empty trays. (Some programs just use cardboard boxes.)

That's it for additional equipment. Generally, the total cost of this new equipment should be considerably less than the annual cost for disposable trays.

## **PREPARING THE PEOPLE**

We have found that the most successful REusable Tray programs are those that train their staff, volunteers and clients well. The success of your program depends on the enthusiasm of your staff & volunteers. The more enthusiasm you can generate for the REusable Trays, the easier your job will be. Since many people are resistant to change, it is important to emphasize the many benefits of a REusable Tray program in order to turn initial skepticism to enthusiastic support.

You will want to let *everyone* know that you are about to convert from flimsy, unsightly, environmentally unsound disposables to new REusable Trays that offer beautiful presentation of your meals and save your program lots of money. Even your clients will need a bit of training to make the program work. But let's start with the staff and volunteers.

### DELIVERY STAFF / VOLUNTEERS

Be sure to show your delivery people sample trays and explain how they work and that the used trays need to be picked up each day and returned for sanitizing. You cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of picking up an empty tray each time they deliver a full one. *Failure to properly impress this point on delivery people is the prime reason for tray loss.* A full explanation of what you are doing and how the program works should be given to each delivery person *in writing*, so they will be able to refer to it as needed. You might note that since the previous day's tray must be returned, it encourages the client to eat the food. It is easier to notice if a client is not eating properly because they don't have a tray to return. **(See Exhibit 1 for a sample explanation sheet.)**

### KITCHEN STAFF

Your kitchen staff will also need to have the workings of the new program explained to them. Serving the food should be fairly quick and efficient to help retain heat. The faster you serve the meals and load the carriers, the less the food cools.

While many programs do not pre-heat the trays, REusable Trays retain heat best when they are pre-warmed prior to serving the food. They must not, however, be made too hot to touch. Also, pre-warming the meal carriers is highly recommended, where practicable, whether you are using disposables or REusables. If you don't pre-warm the carriers, they will draw off heat from the meals until they both come to the same temperature.

The final step for the kitchen staff is loading the returned trays into racks and putting them through the dishwasher. Some programs sanitize the trays the day they are returned. Others do this the following morning, while the meals are cooking, so the trays are warmed in the dishwashers prior to serving the meals. Your choice will depend on the logistics of your program.

### CLIENTS

All meal recipients should be notified well in advance (about two weeks) and in writing of the new trays. **(Exhibits 2a and 2b are sample notices)** It is important that delivery people provide this written notification and show the recipients a sample tray. They should be able to explain and answer client questions at this time. Office staff should also be prepared to answer questions over the phone. If you are working with the children or other relatives of the recipients, they should be notified at this time so they don't start throwing out or taking the REusable Trays.

A second written notice to clients should be provided a few days before beginning with the new REusable Trays. **(Exhibits 3a and 3b are samples of this second notice.)**

**Please Note:** *REusable trays may not be appropriate for some of your clients.* . People with memory problems may have to continue using disposable trays. If they cannot remember to save the tray until tomorrow, if they would over-heat trays in a conventional oven or put them on the stovetop for re-heating, keep them using disposables (see more on warming trays below). Also, if you have temporary clients who are scheduled to go off the program on a certain date, use a disposable tray on the last day so no one has to go back and try to retrieve the REusable Tray.

### SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

Things to emphasize with Staff, Volunteers and Clients:

- Beautiful presentation of the food, leading to...
- Fewer complaints;
- Lower cost of trays;
- Reduced environmental impact;
- Easier handling of REusable Trays vs. disposables
  - easy to open lids for your clients
  - no sharp edges
  - solid, not flimsy flexible trays

### **TRAY USE AND CARE**

1. Labeling Trays. It is highly recommended that you label your trays with your program name, etc., for example:

**Property of  
XYZ Nutrition Program  
Rinse and return to carrier.  
DO NOT THROW AWAY**

Here are two options for labeling trays:

- a. Self-adhesive polyester labels are available by mail order from several sources. Our customers tell us that these hold up well in dishwashers, and if printed in a bright or dark color, they are highly visible, easy to read and relatively inexpensive. Call us for sources.
- b. We now can emboss your name on the lids of the trays in the manufacturing process in place of our logo. This requires a fairly expensive initial tooling charge, but no additional charge thereafter. Minimum production runs apply. Available on Monroe and Leeds standard lids only. Call for details.

**2. We have found that two things can put great stress on REusable Trays:**

- a. Placing a tray with hot food directly onto a cold surface such as in a freezer or on a glass refrigerator shelf;
- b. Re-heating a tray of frozen food in a microwave without first thawing the food.

In both cases above, the temperature of the plastic tray is vastly different from that of the material it is in contact with (the shelf or the food). When one side of the plastic is cold and the other side is hot, stresses are created in the plastic. Over time, this can cause cracking of the bottom of the tray. To avoid this situation, cool the trays in a refrigerator before freezing, and thaw trays with frozen food prior to bringing the food up to temperature.

**3. Warming/reheating trays.** For our Leeds Trays, we recommend that your clients reheat their meals in microwave ovens only. Monroe Trays may be micro-waved or warmed in a conventional oven *set no greater than 230°F*. Instruct your clients never to re-warm trays on the stove-top burners, in a toaster oven, or under broilers, and to position trays in the oven well away from burners/coils. This prevents burned hands and melted trays. Always be aware that the concern with frail elders handling hot trays remains.

**4. Use non-abrasive cleansers when cleaning by hand.**