



TIPS ON STARTING OR CONVERTING TO A REUSABLE TRAY OR BOWL 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 route by route 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. A plastic jug of hot water sitting in your bag or carrier for a while before loading will make a measurable difference.

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. This notice might include an agreement confirming the client is aware of the change **(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.

Note also that the lids on the trays close snugly but do not snap on or seal. This is to balance the need for minimizing spilling with clients' ability to easily open the tray. Delivery staff and volunteers will need to secure their meal carrying containers to prevent spills in event of a vehicle mishap.

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
(xxx)-xxx-xxxx
Rinse and return to carrier.
DO NOT THROW AWAY**

The best way to label your tray is to use self-adhesive polyester labels, available from several online sources. You can customize the information, even including funder's names! 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. You may have a printer in your area who does this, or call us for sources.

2. We have found some 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 or the sides of the lids. 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.

- c. **As with most plastic products, *highly* alkaline detergents (sodium or potassium hydroxide etc.) or bleaching (chlorine, sodium chloride) will more rapidly age the plastic, potentially leading to cracking. Always use *low or non-alkaline detergent* (Dreft, Basic H, Safe Suds, Nalgene L900, and others). Your food-service supply distributor can find these products for you, or search the product name online for sources.**

3. Warming/reheating trays. Generally, it is safest for your clients *only* to reheat meals in a microwave. Our trays are microwavable. Instruct your clients *never* to re-warm trays in the oven, on stove-top burners, in a toaster oven, or under broilers. 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.

STAFF NOTICE COMING CHANGES IN HOME DELIVERED MEAL TRAYS

Overview

Starting _____ we will be making an exciting change in the trays used for most of our home delivered meals. We will replace disposable trays with a re-usable tray.

There are a lot of good reasons to make this change, but perhaps the most important is improvement in our client's satisfaction with the meal we deliver. Studies have shown that appetites improve with attractive presentation. Our new re-useable trays will have a solid, china-like look whose clean lines and elegant appearance make an attractive and appealing presentation.

For staff and volunteers, the new trays will be easier to load and transport. There is no sealing required. And our clients will find these snug fitting trays easy to open. You won't have to worry about sharp edges or trays that twist or open accidentally. For the program, re-usable trays mean less inventory reordering and maintenance in addition to long term savings: re-usables generally pay for themselves over disposables in 6 to 9 months and they're warranted for a full year so we can't lose!

Drivers

Here's how it works. Each day, when a meal is delivered to the home, the delivery person will pick up the prior day's tray. Our seniors will have been notified that the return tray should be rinsed out, and that it will be sanitized back in our kitchen. Drivers will be provided with a separate container to collect the used trays, in most cases a cardboard box. In order for us to get the benefits of re-usables *it is very important to pick up the return tray each day!* 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.

In the Kitchen

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. Avoiding the sealing step with re-usables helps a lot.

While many programs do not pre-heat the trays, re-usable 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, whenever possible. Place a plastic milk jug full of hot tap water in your bag or carrier 10-20 minutes before you plate the food. 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. We may sanitize the trays the day they are returned. or do this the following morning, while the meals are cooking, so the trays are warmed in the dishwashers prior to serving the meals.

Remember

A beautifully served meal nourishes the body and the soul...we can all be proud of the quality of service we are providing to our seniors!

Something New and Wonderful!

Starting _____, our Meals on Wheels Program will make an exciting change in the trays used for most of our home delivered meals. We will replace the trays you now throw away with a re-usable tray. For you, these re-useable trays will be easier to open, will keep your food warm longer and are much more appealing to the eye. For us, re-usable trays mean supply savings and less waste.

These handsome, easy-opening trays will be collected upon the next day's delivery. They should be rinsed out and given to your driver for return to the kitchen for sterilization. You may microwave them, but do not put them in the oven. Remember, your driver cannot leave another meal without picking up a rinsed tray and lid from the day before.

We hope you will enjoy the re-usable trays!

If you have any questions, please call_____.

EXHIBIT 2B

Dear Meals-on-Wheels Recipient,

Meals-on-Wheels of _____ evaluates its services with the goal of improving the quality and efficiency of our meal program. We plan to switch to a plastic, re-usable tray which is more economical and better for the environment. The cost of disposable trays is rising so this will help keep meal costs under control. I think you will like the re-usable tray. The meal's appearance will be more appealing and it is safe to put the tray in the microwave if you so desire. We'll give you instructions about re-warming.

To make the switch to re-usable trays, we will need some help from you. When you finish your meal, just simply rinse the tray out and put it by the door. We will wash and sanitize the tray at our kitchen. The volunteers will pick up the used tray when they deliver your next meal. By having the used tray at the door, ready to go, the volunteers will not be delayed when they stop at your home. Make sure the cover is with the tray as well.

We plan to start using these trays on _____. We will be contacting you in a few weeks to hear what you think about these trays. If you have any questions or concerns about the re-usable tray, please call me at _____.

Sincerely,

EXHIBIT 3A

SECOND NOTICE

Starting _____ your meal will arrive in the new re-usable tray. Please remember to rinse out the empty container and lid and have it ready for the driver to pick up on the next day or they cannot leave a new tray. Please sign the notice below and return to the driver to indicate you understand.

SECOND NOTICE RECEIPT

I understand that each day I must have the empty, rinsed tray and lid for the driver to pick up.

Name _____

Address _____

EXHIBIT 3B

MEALS-ON-WHEELS OF _____

REUSABLE MEAL TRAY AGREEMENT

1. As a participant of the Meals-on-Wheels of _____, home-delivered meal program, your hot meal is delivered in one reusable plastic tray. In the event of loss or damage, you agree to reimburse Meals-on-Wheels \$ _____ towards the cost of the tray.
2. We ask each of the participants to rinse all trays clean of food particles. Meals-on-Wheels will wash and sanitize the trays at the kitchen where the meals are prepared.
3. We ask each participant to return the tray to the driver on the next meal delivery day. Please keep the tray in an accessible, convenient location so the driver will not have to wait for you to find it. Please make sure to include the lid.
4. It is agreed that you will follow all food refrigeration, food re-heating, and tray care instructions as provided to you.
5. If you wish to discontinue meal service, please notify the office at _____ and make arrangements for the return of the trays. If we have been given at least 24 hours notice, we can arrange to have your last meal be in a disposable tray so there will not need to be any trays returned.

I agree to the above conditions for the use of reusable trays by Meals-on-Wheels of _____

Client
Signature _____

Agency
Representative _____

Date _____