

CITY OF SYDNEY

MEALS ON WHEELS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT*

Name: Mark Spruhan

Date: 15 March 2007

Place: City of Sydney Offices, Redfern

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

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SUMMARY

Mark Spruhan is Manager of Aged, Disability and Food Services, of which Meals on Wheels (MoW) is a part, for the City of Sydney. In this interview Mr Spruhan discusses many aspects of the MoW service including its funding (from federal, state and local government), its purpose (support for independent living), and its interrelationship with the City's several activity centres. He discusses the many managerial issues associated with the service and the regulated climate in which cooking and delivery of meals occurs. An increasing focus on food safety has necessitated the introduction of the hygienically reliable cook/chill method. This has allowed some meals to be delivered cold, by City staff in refrigerated vans. It also allows for greater variety in meal content and more flexibility with delivery times. Whilst the actual cooking of meals is outsourced, City premises were upgraded with purpose built kitchens, freezers, refrigerators and ovens to facilitate storage, reheating and distribution under the new system. The MoW service remains primarily a volunteer service. Procedural issues involved in recruiting volunteers, periodic shortages and changes in the volunteer population are discussed. Partnerships with Indigenous services are outlined, as well as logistical problems, when production is in bulk, associated with the provision of multi-cultural food to an ethnically diverse population. Mr Spruhan discusses the various two-way benefits that are an outcome of the service, and the personal enjoyment that contact with volunteers and clients brings. He is anticipating there will be many changes to MoW services in the coming decade because the baby boom generation is ageing. This means different tastes in food and a much larger aged population.

TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Mark Spruhan. It's taking place in what's known as the TNT Towers in Redfern where the City of Sydney has some offices. It's part of the Meals on Wheels Oral History Project which is being done through the City of Sydney's History Programme. Interviewer is Margo Beasley and the date is the 15th of March, 2007.

So, Mark, if you could just introduce yourself and if you don't mind tell us the year and the place of your birth.

O.K, I'm Mark Spruhan, I'm the City of Sydney's Aged, Disability and Food Services Manager and I was born on the 5th of August, 1962 at St Margaret's in Sydney.

So, you're a Sydney boy born and bred?

Yes.

Now, you've been in this job, I think, for a number of years. Is that correct?

Yes. So, I've been here with the former South Sydney, before we merged up with the city. I was - - - started, actually, funny enough the 17th of March, 1998 – does that sound right – yeah, so ten years next year but originally started as a Disability Development Officer with Council and then when the manager retired I moved into his role which was, I think, five years ago, yeah.

So, you have a responsibility for quite a lot of things - - -

Yes.

- - - so perhaps if you could just give us a bit of a précis of all the things you do - - -

Yes.

- - - and then we'll talk in more detail about Meals on Wheels.

About yes. So, Council has an extensive service role for old people and people with disabilities. Firstly, we have the Meals on Wheels service that we'll talk more about as we go along and also we have a series of activity centres. We've got seven activity centres for older people and people with disabilities spread throughout the whole of the City of Sydney. They're in Glebe, Alexandria, Redfern, Kings Cross, Woolloomooloo, Millers Point and Ultimo and at there you get a hot lunch each day and they have activities and things like bingo, bowls and also they do things like craft and gentle exercise and other activities. Council also has a community bus transport, where we

have transport for the people to get to the centres, plus also we provide transport for outings and shopping trips and also for the children's programme in the school holidays and the youth programme in the school holidays. And also attached to that is the Community Bus Scheme where we have buses that community groups can use at a small cost to go on outings. So, for organisations that don't have their own bus they can use one of Council's buses. Other services: we have a podiatry service that we run once a week at the Kepos Street Centre and then we also run a series of healthy ageing initiatives in the local community in community venues like the Rex Centre up at Kings Cross or the Redfern Centre down on The Block in Redfern here and there is other locations.

So, Meals on Weals, I guess, kind of dovetails in with a whole lot of those other responsibilities?

Yes.

It has actually been functioning now for fifty years within the City of Sydney in one form or another - - -

Yes

- - - and it's also moved in and out with the boundary changes to South Sydney Council as well - - -

Yes.

- - - but now City of Sydney covers the large area of those, what was formerly two councils.

Yes.

Meals on Wheels – can you tell us a bit about how Meals on Wheels fits with the general philosophy of assisting aged people and people with disabilities?

Yes, yes. So, Meals on Wheels is – we get funding from the state government, from the Department of Ageing and Disability and Homecare and it's under the HAC, Home and Community Care Programme which is joint funded by the federal government and the state government and it's – the aim of the programme is to keep people living independently in their own home so that they can go on living in their own home; they don't have to prematurely institutionalised in a residential nursing home, etcetera. So, it's part of a group of other services like community transport, neighbour aid services that go and visit people in their home. Home maintenance and modification services go and make adjustments to people's home, so they can have handrails, etcetera, and they can live independently. So, the main focus is that if they have a meal at home they can live independently and the other focus of the Meals on Wheels service is that we always say it's more than just a meal: it's not just the nutrition they get out of a meal, they get a daily visit of

someone who will check how they're going and things like that and monitor, you know, their health, etcetera, so that if there is any problems they can notify the Meals on Wheels Coordinator who can get one of the staff to go out and visit the client and see if they need any – to go to the doctor's or whether they need any other services.

I guess the thing that distinguishes Meals on Wheels from quite a lot of the other services is that it's primarily a volunteer service.

Yes.

I mean, there are staffing, you do have certain kind of employed people involved with it but part of its philosophy is actually that it's a volunteer service.

Yes, yes. Well, it started up - as I found out recently – it started up in Adelaide and there was a woman in Adelaide who started delivering meals to people and then there was a similar – on a bike, I think it was – and there was a similar people in Melbourne who did a similar thing, that it was the need for a nutritious meal that started the service and they all started out of voluntary organisations. So, it has been - with the City of Sydney it started, they used to have a voluntary workers committee and it was like an extensive network of volunteers from church groups many, you know, the Lions Groups and etcetera and things like that, voluntary organisations that got involved with delivering Meals on Wheels and they would have a certain day when they'd come in and deliver the meals. That's sort of changed over the time, that we still have some groups like the Grammarians that go out of Millers Point Centre where they deliver the meals who were based around a church group and we're sort of getting more now corporate groups - so we've got a few corporate groups that come in and deliver the meals or we've also got a group from Windgap which is a service for people with disabilities that come in and deliver meals too, so it's sort of changing, is changing, or the type of volunteer we're getting is changing.

Does that mean that the service is not so much by individual people just acting off on their own bat, so to speak, but it comes through primarily organisationally?

Not any more. I think more there are a lot – there's probably more individuals now than there was in the past because before they used to come through a church group and the church group would say, you know, "Margo, you're this week and Betty you're next week", etcetera, and things like that, so they would organise the people whereas now it's like people that have retired and I think it's because people are living a lot longer now that they go, "I need something to do to keep me active" - and I know one of the volunteers and, you know, he's a recently retired public servant and he also volunteers for another service – and I've forgotten the name of it – but they pick up food from other, from restaurants, and take it to sort of some of the homeless and the shelters – something Harvest, I've forgotten the name.

That's O.K.

Yes, but he does – they do bits and pieces of volunteering and things.

And he does it just as an individual who wants to be involved?

Yes, an individual, yeah. And there's a lot of people – and we've had people in the past that have come to Sydney and they miss their - you know, come as a young person and I think the demographics of Sydney is quite young – they come as a young person and they think, "I haven't - I miss my grandparents" or something like that. They come up from Tasmania, and they'd spent a lot of time with their grandparents and they want to mix with older people and it's a good way of seeing older people and interacting with older people is by delivering meals.

Could you talk just a little bit about Windgap because that's a rather special organisation?

Yes, yes.

It's a little bit different to people to people who are quite mentally and physically able doing the volunteering work.

Yes, yes. And I think that's, the Windgap, so they run several programmes mainly for people with intellectual disabilities and so they - and they run group homes and things like that - but they have a day programme and I think one of the things that they try and do is connect the people to the community and also to show that people with disabilities can do lots of stuff and can contribute rather than not just - they're not just people that take things, that they contribute and I think the people getting the meals from the people at Windgap really enjoy having the, you know, the younger people around because a lot of the times they don't have younger people, they don't see the younger people.

So, it's like a two way benefit, really, isn't it?

Yes, yes. And for a lot of volunteers that is the case. We do have sort of a variety of volunteers and we reimburse the volunteers for costs for the – so, for petrol costs and maintenance of the car, so they get \$20 for doing a run, a series of about 10 to 15 drop-offs to people. So, that's to reimburse them for the costs of the car and things like that and other - the runners which are the other people that go in the car with them get the cost of their train fare or bus fare, which is about \$5, to come and assist with the volunteering. So, for some people that little bit of extra money, the reimbursement they get for the car, is if they're on a pension or something like that, it's a little bit of extra money that they can put towards keeping the car running and things like that.

It could be quite useful if they do a few days a week.

Yes, yes. And for some people they do, some of them do five days a week or, you know, they live locally and things like that and they enjoy, you know, enjoy doing it and it's for some people that have recently retired or that they like that idea of going out and doing things but they also - some of them are looking after grandkids and things like that. That's why it's perfect, because it's in the middle of the day and doesn't interfere with, you know, kids being at home and things like that, yeah.

Does that mean it's been relatively easy to get volunteers to service Meals on Wheels?

Not, I wouldn't say - it's never easy (laughs) because, yeah, for a lot of people they think you can just go along and volunteer and that's it but we offer, you know, some training and we also have to do referee checks and police checks on people because we're sending them in to, you know, by themselves into people's home who are vulnerable and so we need to make sure that we've got the right people delivering the meals. So, when they first come on they get to go out - we normally send them out with other people who are sort of trusted volunteers and they'll report back, "He went well" or "She went well. They seemed to have good rapport with the people", and things like that, so - and, you know, first of all we have to check their referees and the funding body, DADHC [Dep't of Ageing, Disability and Homecare], do police checks on all our volunteers. We sent out a form, so just to make sure that we're getting the right people.

So, that would sometimes mean that people would be willing to volunteer but they might be rejected on particular grounds?

Yes, but although we haven't ever had anyone rejected because it's funny because they - I suppose people'd, if they had to fill that form in - like, we normally send them the form beforehand, so if they had - well, we wouldn't sort of try and embarrass people but they, you know, they get the form beforehand so they know they have to agree to a police check and have to give two referees, so.

So, that might self select in the way people think, "O.K, I won't go any further"?

Yes, it does, yes.

But do you ever have problems with running short of volunteers, like, to actually get the work done?

Oh yes, we do. And we also get - we normally have enough people to run round and deliver the meals but sometimes we have a shortage of people with cars and things like that, so we have in the past - there's a few taxi drivers that we use, so we get a couple of taxi drivers come in and they'll drive the person 'round and the other person will go and deliver it, so we have to pay for that. And also, the way our service is set up, we have chilled meals and we've got hot meals and the hot meals are delivered by the volunteers and the chilled meals are delivered by Council staff in refrigerated vans, yes.

And I think City of Sydney is the only council that does that, do you think?

Uh-huh. Yes, it would be pretty well the only one that does it but we have had a lot of other services visit us to see the way we do it because I think a lot of other services used to get meals, especially in the country and things like that or down the coast and up Newcastle way, a lot of the services used to get meals from the hospital, etcetera, and now they're not getting them from the hospital. The hospital can't do them because – it's probably a lot to do with the food safety and that's one of the biggest changes in the service (laughs) over the years is, because I think originally there was not – and I think it's just, it's also societal change and regulation change too but there was not as much emphasis on the food safety and making sure that the meals were delivered at safe temperatures and things like that. I think, you know, people used to leave the meals on doorsteps for people and on windowsills, etcetera, and things like that. So, we have had, had to – sort of, the volunteers have been here a long time - we've had to sort of retrain them to make sure that, you know, the food safety aspect is sort of emphasised with them and retrained to explain why you can't just leave a meal for people because, you know, a lot of the people we deal with, deliver meals to, have compromised immune systems and, you know, the last thing you want to do is give them a dose of food poisoning, yeah.

There's two things I'd like to talk about now. One is just about the finances of it all, how all that works out.

Yes.

Because it's not a free service and also just historically how the changes have occurred, the shift to, because it's really required a whole
- - -

O.K, yes.

- - - upgrade of the way the meals are produced and the distribution points and so on.

Yes, yes.

So, first of all if you could just talk about the finances because people pay for the meals, don't they?

Ye, yes, yes, so currently they pay \$4.50 a meal. So, most people get the meal – a lot of people get the meals, get five a week, so, you know, it's about just over \$20, yeah, and the – so, we've got, yeah, but we also get, well, we get the funding from DADHC to - the funding doesn't actually cover the meals; it covers the staff to prepare the meals and the Meals on Wheels Coordinator and the Food Services Coordinator and other infrastructure. So, we're meant

to get cost recovery on our meals but we don't quite do that on the meals and so the Council actually subsidises the difference.

When you say your "meant to get cost recovery", under whose -?

Under the sort of the HACC [Home and Community Care] guidelines you're meant to get cost recovery on your service but Council's always been quite generous and always looked after older people and people with disabilities, so they always seem not that fussed about the little bit of extra money the Council subsidise it, yes, yes.

Because not everybody is in difficult financial circumstances.

No.

Not every recipient but many of them are, aren't they?

Yes, yes.

They're not well off, necessarily.

Oh yes, a lot of them are not, not well off at all but yes, you've got a variety of people and it just covers a span of the different populations of the City of Sydney and, you know, you've got people with million dollar views in Kings Cross (laughs) so, who have lived there all their life and things like that but they might – but I don't think they have that much money but they've got a view of the harbour and, you know, they're in their 80s and things like that, so they probably wouldn't qualify if you were looking at, if it was means tested but the service is not means tested; it's based on need, whoever needs the service. And then you've got people – we've got a lot of people who might have had, you know, a mental health problem or we've got people with, you know, drug and alcohol problems that need the meal. The meal is, you know, essential to keep them going. Also, we have – we've also over the last, you know, fifteen, twenty years had a lot more people with HIV/AIDS using the service. So, it's sort of meant that we've had to change the service a lot because it's not the traditional – before, a lot of the people were in boarding houses and the stock of boarding houses has gone down by about seventy per cent over the last fifteen, twenty years, so there's not as many people living in boarding houses around the area and so the clientele has changed and that, with that leads into that other thing you ask is about the way the meal's produced and things like that. So, the first meals, I think, were produced in the kitchen at the Town Hall.

Yes.

And then they moved up to Surry Hills on – it's not Moore Park Road - - -

South Dowling Street.

- - - South Dowling Street and then so that – they were there for a long time.

Do you know what the reason for that move was?

I think there was a kitchen built up there for them.

Right. So, it was probably a more purpose built kitchen rather than the kitchen - - -

Yes, and I think it was also, it would be better access for the volunteers to bring their cars in to pick up the meals. So, I can't imagine, you know, people driving into the Town Hall to pick up meals.

That would have been very difficult.

Yes, and I think it'd be even more difficult these days – and also probably because the population they were servicing, most of them were in that area and I think that might have been the thing too but you need to have the food closer to the people you're servicing.

Then they started producing – I think that might have been the Roper Street Centre.

Yes. The Roper Centre.

The Roper Centre, rather. So, producing meals from there?

Yeah, Roper Centre and they had an activity centre up there too for a long time, yeah.

So, the meals would have been distributed from that point?

Yes, from that point, yeah.

All over the relevant area?

Yes, all over the – yes, all over the City of Sydney but I'm a bit vague on what happened when in between the de-amalgamation, (laughs) if you want to call it that, in – I think that was in '90, '89 or something like that.

Around that time.

So, I think it was '89 and I think because the majority of the population went to South Sydney or the majority of the residents went to South Sydney and the Roper Centre was in South Sydney, South Sydney got the majority of the Meals on Wheels and I'm quite sure that they had – the City of Sydney at that stage did their Meals on Wheels from Millers Point because there is quite a big kitchen down there and both services in that ten year period, well, fifteen year period, that we were apart, I suppose we sort of progressed in parallel but both, by the time we got amalgamated again, both services had moved to the cook/chill system and buying meals from a service provider that produces cook/chill meals.

Just to elaborate on that, cook/chill meals means that they're cooked and then they're reduced quite rapidly to a – perhaps you can explain that and the point of it.

Yes, so cook/chill, yeah, the idea of it is the dangerous points for food are between over five and below sixty five, so the idea with cook/chilling is that you get it from sixty five down to below five within the shortest period.

Centigrade?

Yes, centigrade – within the shortest period possible because that's when the bugs – you've got more risk of disease and things like that coming though or, you know, the food deteriorating so that it becomes dangerous for people to eat. So, with the blast chilling I think most meals they can get within half an hour they blast chill them down to below five and then they keep them there. And they also use this other system called HACCP, which is Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points, (laughs) which basically looks at the critical control points as far as temperature and food handling of when you get the food and they're things like - and it goes back and all the Woolworths and Coles use this now for their fruit and vegetable and things like that. It's from when the food's grown, what pesticides are used on it, how it's transported to the market and how it's kept in – you know, especially for things like meat - how it's kept in refrigeration, is it in refrigeration all the way through? And then when it's delivered is it the right temperature and then does it get put through - is it cooked to the right temperature, etcetera, until it gets to the end user, yeah.

So, it must have been an extremely significant upgrade?

Yes. Oh, it was, yes. And one of the parts was that we did have a, you know, a significant number of staff that were cooking the meals and also a lot of the people that were doing the meals sort of lived in the area and they knew some of the Meals on Wheels clients (laughs) and things like that, so there was a lot of upset with the clients and a lot of the clients didn't want it to change because some of them didn't want – they thought the people were all going to lose their jobs and all this type of stuff, so it was interesting but it was one of those things that – and a lot of people really did like the old meals because it was cooked in the morning and then brought out to them hot and it really looked like a home cooked meal and I think they - - -

Because I think there were often a lot of, like, stews and the food would sometimes be ladled out.

Yes, stews and yes. And also that the menu, because we were producing it ourselves you could change the menu any time you wanted and so if people didn't like something we'd just change it or they wanted this or, you know, Mrs Smith wanted no gravy – you had more control over that aspect of it. You could, you know, cater to individual tastes a lot better but it just wasn't, the food safety aspect wasn't, I wouldn't say, the greatest and also the kitchens

were very old and they would have taken enormous amounts of money to re-equip it too and the staff needed to be retrained to deal with cook/chill, etcetera, and things like that. So, a decision was made to move to cook/chill and they bought the Meals on Wheels distribution centre out at Burrows Road at St Peters and it got specifically equipped with freezers and fridges and also, you know, specific ovens for reheating the meals - but also part of that was the retraining of the staff, so the decision was made to keep as many staff as they could and they retrained them and that was when the decision was made to make, to have the refrigerated vans and deliver the chilled meals and part of that was, part of the reason for that was that we'd had a lot of demand from the younger people with, you know, HIV/AIDS or people with mental illness who didn't want to eat their meal in the middle of the day' they wanted to choose when they ate their meal. So, we – so that was another thing, so it gave us more flexibility, having the chilled meals and so that people could go – I don't, you know, with HIV/AIDS it's episodic so they might not feel well at luncheon but they might find at dinnertime they might want to eat their meal. If they got a hot meal you can't reheat it three times, you know, and especially
- - -

For health, hygiene and safety reasons?

Yes, for the safety reasons. So, that was one of the things is that it does give – and, you know, like people with appointments to go and, you know, people who have dialysis and things like that we can now on some days deliver two meals on one day so they've got their meal when they get back from their dialysis, etcetera, so it really does mean that we can better meet a lot of people's needs.

It assumes, of course, that those people then have the capacity and the equipment and so on to reheat the meal themselves?

Yeah.

Which I guess quite a lot of people would have microwave ovens and so on to do that?

Yes, they do.

But some people do still get their meals delivered hot, don't they?

Yes, yes A lot of them - - - it's about forty percent hot meals and sixty per cent are chilled meals but for the people getting the chilled meals we've got a community worker at each of the activity centres that I mentioned earlier and part of their role is to assess the people on Meals on Wheels. So, when we get a new person on Meals on Wheels they will go out to the house and check if they can operate the microwave or do they use the oven and they sort of get them to show them how to use it and things like that. So, we do make sure that people can use it before – because, you know, we have had times where people have just – they might have a mental health problem and they got a

chilled meal but they were sitting down and eating it straight away, chilled, so we moved them onto a hot run or, yeah.

So, you need a lot of personal information about people, don't you?

Yes.

And even down to, I've seen them having a little discussion about a particular kind of cakey dessert might not be suitable for X or Y person because he doesn't have any teeth or something like that.

Yes.

It's a very individualised service.

Oh yes, yes. And we try and meet everyone's needs. You know, we've got a few clients that have particular dietary needs and we've worked with the people that supply the meals - Master Catering Food Services - we've worked with them to develop diets for these people. The only problem is that they have to get frozen meals because they need to make them in bulk for them but there's some people that won't eat, you know, like fifteen different vegetables and don't eat chicken but they only eat meat with a certain style of meat and things like that, so – but we still always try and make sure because a lot of those people are people that need the service the most, so we always make sure, accommodate them, to make sure that we can meet their needs and, you know, there's always a way of doing it for most of the people.

So, somebody who might only ever eat roast beef and mashed potato, the difficulty then would be to produce enough of that in bulk, so therefore it would have to be frozen?

Yes, yes, that's right, yes.

And that person would have to have the capacity then for thawing and reheating?

Yes, they do, yes. And the other thing is that we try and discourage that as much as we can because the way – the menu's set up on a six week cycle and the menu's designed – well, it's approved by a dietician and it covers all the food groups, making sure everyone gets a bit of fish and a bit of this and a bit of meat and a bit of chicken and all the different vegetables, etcetera, so we really try and make sure everyone's nutrition needs are met.

Because that's like a prime focus, isn't it, of the service?

Yes, yes, yes. And that's why we don't encourage people to get different meals and for a lot of people, a lot of the people would be happy with a roast dinner every day but we really have a duty of care to give them, you know, cover all the food groups.

That leads into another topic – quite an interesting one – which is that you service a pretty multicultural clientele, including indigenous people but also people from lots of other countries in the world.

Yes, yes, yes.

Can you tell me a bit about how that works because think you have trialled doing different kinds of multicultural meals?

Yes, yes. And we did - - - I mean, we have – and this is in the past, you know, we've tried – there's a large Greek population at Rosebery and in the past we've trialled, you know, different moussakas and various Greek meals with them and we – one of the things that we got told was that they wanted a traditional moussaka and some of the people said, you know, like, "My kids come 'round on the weekend and make me the traditional moussaka. If you just stick to the meals you do well and (laughs) we'll be happy with them".

They were disappointed, in other words?

Yeah, because it wasn't the one that they - and it's very hard to sort of mass produce a moussaka that would meet their needs but we do - we often try different things with people to try and meet their needs but it is very hard and we've had sort of Russian groups where we've provided meals with and we had - funnily enough we gave them Chicken Kiev which was funny because when I was talking to the people they were saying it's called something similar like Chicken Kiev in Russian or Ukrainian - or I can't remember quite exactly where they were from but the former Russian states - so it was similarly and they said, you know, it's pretty - but the ingredients are so different in Australian and things like that, so it's very hard to make it.

To actually reproduce what they had?

Yes, the authenticity, yes. And to do it in, you know, in bulk that's always the problem. But, you know, we still keep looking at ways of doing it and, you know, one of the – Master Catering Food Service who supply the meals, they have also always suggested that it would be easier - it's easier to have a centre based meal, as in a multicultural meal rather than the individual Meals on Wheels one because you can make it more – because you make it in big trays and things like that, it's easier.

So, the centre based meals, that's when people might come to the activity centre and dine there?

Yes, like a, yes.

Which I think is also encouraged, isn't it, because it gets people out of the house?

Yes, yes. And that's always the way we've worked it is that for people that are on Meals on Wheels long term it is quite socially isolating and it's not good

for people to be on Meals on Wheels for too long but there are quite a lot of people that do stay on because they're not, you know, due to ill health or other reasons - they might be agoraphobic or something like that and they don't want to go out. They do stay on Meals on Wheels but we do always try and encourage people to come to the centres and, you know, get involved in their local community because that's all part of the service that we run. It's not always successful but we do try. (laughs)

You do what you can.

Yes.

And what about indigenous groups, because you service an area that would have quite a large indigenous population?

Yes, yes. And we do - - - we did have a project with the Alleena Aboriginal Homecare Service where we provided meals and during that time we had a showcase with - they brought all their clients along to Alexandria Town Hall and we provided meals for everyone, to get them to taste it and things like that and see whether they like it and everything like that. So, we have provided meals and then from that we had a lot more people on Meals on Wheels and Alleena - they had the choice of whether they were delivered by our staff or they were delivered by the Alleena staff. So, you know, we were guided by Alleena what was - coached culturally appropriate for the service and that sort of ran for a while and actually we nominated it for an award with the Heart Foundation and it got highly commended, I think, or something like that. And that worked well for a while but they did change the direction of how they wanted to do it - and they did have a lot of people that were not in the City of Sydney area but we'd deliver meals to them and they'd take them out to people but I think their service changed direction and the aim of what they were trying to do was to get people introduced to the meal service and then become part of the meal service - and so we still have people, we've got three or four people that are still on the service from that time but we don't get as many Aboriginal people as we probably should but we do keep in contact with Alleena and we do, you know, joint visits with them to people and explain the service but for some people they've had bad experiences and so we keep trying but whether - - -

It doesn't necessarily fit for them?

No, it doesn't, yeah.

Have you ever had any indigenous volunteers just in the general service?

We have had a few, not specifically indigenous, but we've had a few of the volunteers have had partners who were Aboriginal or things like that who would deliver for us. We've, you know - - - but we've also, you know, we've had a lot of Aboriginal staff working in the past - we haven't had as many recently - who worked for the service before the changeover and things like that, yeah. But it's something, you know, that's why we always sort of work

with Wyanga and Alleena, the two Aboriginal services, to try and get people to, you know, become involved, etcetera.

Yes, because the assumption is that it's a bit like if you talk about public housing tenants, that they are people who are always on the receiving end of services.

Yes.

But in fact, quite a few of the people who volunteer for you are also public housing tenants.

Yes, that's right, yeah.

They give as well as well as receive.

Yes.

And so the same is true for indigenous people and other cultural groups.

Yes, oh yes. And we do have a variety of volunteers, a good variety of volunteers that, you know, are from all different sort of backgrounds, etcetera.

Can you give me a bit of a picture of that?

Yes. We do have, and, you know, one of the ones that comes to mind is Vladimir who used to volunteer and it was really good because he had trouble finding work and things like that and he – but he had a van and - - -

A van?

- - - a van, yeah, and so he volunteered quite regularly and things like that and then he saw a job as a delivery driver and he thought, "Oh, I could go and do that" and, like, we gave him, you know, acted as a referee for him to say that he was reliable and things like that and he's got the job. So, it was good for, you know - and he was a Russian speaking volunteer which was very good because we had a few Russian clients, so we've had a few people - and we've got another guy, Ely, who come along because he wanted to speak – he's from mainland China, wanted to speak, practise his English. We've got, you know, younger students that come, a few of them. We've had, you know, as I explained before, we had one guy who was a photographer who just wanted to spend time with older people because he missed his grandparents in Tasmania. We've had, you know, journalists and opera singers and it's a wide variety of people that just come at that stage of their life where they just decided they should be giving something to the community, yeah. And we do have - - - we have had also people, you know, from the gay and lesbian community that have just got involved and, you know, we've tried to sort of recruit more people from the gay and lesbian community to see if, you know, because I imagine there'd be a fair few people living in the area who have just

retired and things like that who might want to get involved, yes. So, it always amazes me, the diversity of, of where they come from and why they're doing it, why people are getting involved and some of it is that "I used to do it with my mum" or "I used to do it with", you know, "And I just thought, I just saw the van going 'round and I thought oh, I'd ring up", yeah. And it is interesting now, though, because we are getting more and more people ringing up who want to, who want to volunteer on weekends and things like that, you know, people that work and they - because there's more and more units in the area in sort of specifically in Redfern/Waterloo, I suppose, and other bits of the city - that want to volunteer on weekends and we often refer them to one of the other servers, like the Redfern and the inner city home support service who provide services on the weekend, voluntary services on the weekend. So, we sort of do work a lot in cooperation with all the other services.

Because Meals on Wheels is not delivered on weekends, is it?

Yeah. No, it's just Monday to Friday but we do provide weekend meals on a Friday. And they can be frozen meals or sometimes chilled meals for the weekend or salads or something, yeah.

And you also often provide additional supplies for Christmas and Easter, I think?

Yes, yes. So, and traditionally - this is a tradition that started in the City Council a long time ago and I think they had the Welfare Committee organise it originally, where I think they had people from Rotary or the Lions Club and Salvation Army and a couple of other organisations and it was called, yeah, the Welfare Fund or the Welfare Committee and one of the things was that they provided a hamper at Christmas and at Easter and we just ordered them yesterday (laughs) for Easter.

For Easter.

For Easter. So, yes.

It's called a hamper but it doesn't actually come in a basket?

No, no, it's in a - normally put it in one of the recycled bags and things like that, so we normally put it in a bag with the, you know, the Council logo on it or one of the little shopping bags that you can get - the Council give out - and, you know, it's got mainly things that get people over, you know, the day when there's public holidays and things like, you know, Sao biscuits, like some fruit - so, we normally give them a banana and a apple, also long-life milk, the little cereals - I'm trying to think of all the other things. There's all sorts of - a little bit of Vegemite, jam, Sustagen sort of things, high sort of energy drinks and just little fruit packets and fruit bars and things like that; just little things that can keep them going over the weekend if they don't have any other foods, yeah.

So, it's not really a meal per se? -

No.

But it'd have quite a range of nutritional benefit in it?

Yes, yes, yes. And Cup 'o' Soups and things like that.

Yes, things that are easy to bring in.

Yes, yeah.

So, are you anticipating any changes to the service in the near future?

Well, I think, yeah – I always think that not quite yet but I think in the next five to ten years that, you know, we'll probably get sort of a lot more of the baby boomers who get to seventy five, eighty, who possibly will come onto the service or be looking for a service - and that's what I always think that, you know, their food tastes are a lot different to the people who are seventy five, eighty now and they will, you know, maybe want Thai food and, yeah, so I think it's ever evolving service and you've just got to – a lot of the times you've just got to try a few things and see if people like it. At the moment, like, we've tried, you know, people say the food might be a bit bland or something like that, so you spice it up a bit and then you get complaints that it's too spicy, so. And, you know, we've tried giving people condiments so that they can add sort of flavours to it and so it is a sort of a – it's constantly evolving more than – I wouldn't say it sort of changes that quickly, the meal service. It's better that it evolves, yes.

And it's never going to be perfect, is it, because it's not perfect in your own home?

No. Yes, yes, yes.

So, when you're trying to serve such a large population. So, how many people would actually be receiving it through the City of Sydney?

It's about two hundred and fifty people a day get the meal, you know, the hot and the cold meals, yeah.

And then you have other people coming to the centres?

Yeah, and then we've got about one hundred and twenty five to one hundred and fifty people coming to the centres, yes.

And really it's quite a comprehensive service with a lot of infrastructure, isn't it?

Oh yes, yes, it is - and we've just recently done an age means assessment that's mainly looking at the activity centres and the facilities that they're in and then how to make it sort of more so that it can meet the needs of the people

who are retiring now and also we had focus groups on what people wanted and a lot of the people seemed to want more low cost exercise classes but they wanted to do it in a multipurpose centre, they didn't want to go to an age centre. So, that's one of the big challenges for us at the moment, is to set the service up so we can attract more people because a lot of the people that go to the centres now, the majority of them would be people living in Department of Housing who come in to have a meal each day and they're probably an older; they've been going there for a fair while. We're not getting that many new people joining the centre. We do get some people but not that we always, that we would think that the centre's numbers will increase significantly because most of the younger older people now want to do different things and with the Senior's Card they can go and get discounts everywhere, so the meal at the centre is not as attractive as it was in the past when people were living in boarding houses, etcetera.

They might be able to get a relatively cheap meal somewhere else that's more to their taste?

Yes. Yes, and places like clubs, they have two and three dollar meals and I notice down at – was it Coogee? – before Christmas and they had a seven dollar meal or the five or six dollar meal with if you showed your Senior's Card on a Wednesday and – so, there's a lot of competition out there for the food, yeah.

And that can only be a good thing.

Yes.

It'll keep the demand for Meals on Wheels lower

Yes.

Although some people have mentioned to me, and I'm sure you must have thought of this too, that because of the ageing baby boomer generation, before terribly long we're going to be very top heavy with old people.

Yeah.

With far fewer younger people at the bottom and that is going to change the dynamics of a lot of these services, I suppose?

Oh yes, and I know there's – I've heard a lot of things and read a lot of reports about what people think are going to happen but you can never sort of really predict what direction it's going to go in because people have such individual tastes but one thing is certain and what they've said was that the baby boomers had everything they've gone along through, every area they've gone along through, they've always created a stir and changed things, so whatever happens, it's going to change and the way things are done, I think, will change, yes.

Well, they're a big lobby group, if nothing else, I guess.

Yeah. Because of the bulk of numbers, yeah, and they're used to getting what they want. (laughs)

And as far as your job satisfaction is concerned, is this a job you enjoy?

Oh yes, yes, it's very enjoyable. You know, there's – I mean, there's always bad parts to it but on the whole it's very enjoyable when you get to - you know, at Christmas we always have a lunch with the volunteers and it always, never ceases to amaze me. Every year you get some of the same people but you always get new people and just chatting to them about why they volunteer and things like that and you always think, oh, you know, you've given this person the opportunity to be involved in the community and things like that. So, it's satisfying in that way, that you're sort of, like, sort of part of the facilitation of sort of community development and community interaction. That's what sort of gives you more satisfaction than anything and that's sort of specifically also with all the healthy ageing stuff that we do. It's great to be able to see, you know, people tell you that, "I couldn't bend over and now I can walk down the street", and you always think that, you know, you've increased the quality of that person's life or you've assisted with it; they've done a lot of it themselves but you've assisted with it. But also, you know, you always think the costs that you've saved by putting on that cost off from the health system, etcetera, and things like that but mainly it's that they've got a smile on their face, that's the main thing, yeah.

Are there other things you'd like to say about the service today that we haven't covered?

Probably, (laughs) but I can't think at the moment.

Can't think of what they are?

No, no, can't think at the moment. I think one of the things is that I do think that Council's always been – the Council service has always been looked upon as, you know, like, an innovative service and in, I think it was 2004 or 2005 we did get a recognition from the Meals on Wheels Association in the category of Innovation, that our service was the most innovative services and the way we've changed it 'round to how it's operating now and that's led to a lot of the other services coming to see what we do, yeah.

So, you can act as a bit of a model for other councils?

Yes.

Because I imagine in other council areas – I guess probably in the rural areas in particular - where councils are less well heeled and so on and they have fewer resources that it's not such an easy thing to change the way the service is delivered.

Yes, yes. But it is, yeah, in some ways but I know that sort of down the South Coast, like, the Wollongong area, they had ten or something different – that might be a bit wrong – but ten or so different Meals on Wheels services to cover the whole area and now they're more working together. A similar thing's happened down closer to Bega, that they had all these little services that worked independently and now they're more working together and they're looking at different ways and they have all said, "Oh, that model that you've got with the refrigerated vans and things like that does give a lot of options, especially in a country area where you've got to travel a long way, like, being able to keep the meal refrigerated you can deliver, it's a lot easier to deliver".

That's nice to know, I guess - - -

Yes.

- - - for your job and your department.

Yes.

We might finish there.

Yes, O.K.

Thanks very much, Mark.

Thanks a lot, Margo.