



This booklet is based on information from an oral history project conducted by the City of Sydney's History Program in 2007. It commemorated the fifty year anniversary of the Meals on Wheels service within the City of Sydney.

This booklet forms part of a series of publications based on oral history projects about the history of Sydney.

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Cover photograph: Meals on Wheels delivery early 1970s.  
City of Sydney Archives.

*Sydney Stories*

**Meals on Wheels**



*city of villages*



City of Sydney employee Patricia Lararto.  
Photo: Sharon Hickey.

## Meals on Wheels in Australia was modelled on a similar volunteer service initiated in the London Blitz and replicated in Adelaide and Melbourne in the post-war years.

In 1957 the City of Sydney became the first council in New South Wales to introduce the Meals on Wheels service, the purpose of which has remained the same: enabling people who have difficulty with shopping, cooking or preparing meals to continue to live independently in their homes. Although the service is funded through federal, state and local government, it is organised and implemented at the local level. It has always relied on volunteers to be either 'drivers' who bring their own cars to transport the food, or 'runners' who take the food from the car into each home while the driver waits with the vehicle.

Although the function of Meals on Wheels has remained constant, there have been organisational changes over the last fifty years in the way that meals are prepared, stored and delivered. When the service began in Sydney in 1957 all meals were cooked in the kitchens of the Lower Town Hall, picked up there and delivered to clients' homes in volunteers' cars. It was possible then to find parking in central Sydney. Menus at that time were limited and the food was transported in big heavy vats which had to be lugged, often up several flights of stairs, to each dwelling, where it was ladled onto clients' plates. In the early years of the service many of the women volunteers returned to the Lower Town Hall after they finished their runs to spend the afternoon peeling vegetables in preparation for the following day's meals.



Logistical issues, advancing technology and an increasingly regulated hygiene and food safety climate necessitated improvements in the way that meals were prepared, stored and delivered. Meals are no longer distributed from Sydney Town Hall but from several other points in the Council's area, often in conjunction with Council activity centres, which also have dining facilities. New kitchens were built at various delivery points and supplied with freezers, refrigerators and ovens to facilitate preparation, heating and distribution. The City now employs an outside service that uses the hygienically reliable cook/chill method to prepare food in individual packages. The City of Sydney has paid staff that deliver chilled meals in refrigerated vans to clients, which increases the flexibility of the service. Chilled meals allow for greater variety and also better suit the needs of particular clients because they can be refrigerated and reheated at a time of the client's choosing.

Daily hot meals, Monday to Friday, remain essential for clients who are unable, for reasons of health, ability or inadequate facilities, to store or reheat cold meals; and for this reason volunteers remain the mainstay of the Meals of Wheels service.



City of Sydney employee Mary Hutchinson (left) and volunteer Janet Philpot.  
Photo: Sharon Hickey.

Thousands of women and men, as individuals or as representatives of community organisations, churches, commercial firms and corporations, have given their time to the City of Sydney Meals on Wheels program over the last five decades.

Thelma Crawley attended the City of Sydney's first public meeting about the Meals on Wheels service in Sydney Town Hall in 1956. Her career as a dedicated volunteer began when the service did in 1957 and continued uninterrupted until just a few years ago. Her volunteering days were initially associated with her employment in central Sydney as a dressmaker for Myer, at that time a Melbourne department store. She and other employees donated time during their working day, on a rotating roster. When Mrs Crawley left formal employment to take care of her sick husband, she continued volunteering for Meals on Wheels in the City of Sydney but did so under the auspices of the Women's Auxiliaries of the Returned Servicemen's League, with which she is still associated. She recalls that in the early years of Meals on Wheels in the City of Sydney various city firms, especially retail stores, took regular responsibility for delivery



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on Fridays. The Returned Servicemen's League Women's Auxiliaries did Thursdays and women from various religious organisations did the remainder: Catholic women on Wednesdays, Jewish women on Tuesdays and Methodist women on Mondays.

Few volunteers have a service record as long as that of Mrs Crawley. Some people volunteer for short periods when they happen to have time on their hands, others contribute regularly over years, or decades, and still others move in and out of the service as the demands of their own lives wax and wane. Volunteers also come from a very wide spread of cultural and social backgrounds. Many volunteers live some distance from the inner Sydney area serviced by the City of Sydney, and men and women of all ages and walks of life contribute. Whilst some volunteers are young fully employed business people, some are recent immigrants, some are retirees, some live with an intellectual disability, others work part-time and still others are as elderly as many of their clients but are fit and healthy and see no reason not to continue with the work.

Meals on Wheels clients in the City of Sydney are equally diverse, just as the residential population of inner urban Sydney is diverse. Along with the many aged people that the City's volunteers deliver to, clients may also be people living with disability, HIV AIDS or mental illness. Like the volunteers they also come from a range of social, religious, national and economic backgrounds and English may not be their first language. This diversity means that what's required of Meals on Wheels volunteers in the City of Sydney can be more demanding, and more interesting and rewarding, than it is in more homogenous areas.



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Meals on Wheels volunteers deliver in all weather.  
Photo: Sharon Hickey.

Graham Kerr is a retired teacher who lives in the inner city, having taught high school in Jakarta for many years. He is now employed part-time in other work and began volunteering for Meals on Wheels three years ago because he enjoyed opportunities for community engagement that his work in education had previously provided. Mr Kerr shares his weekly run with another man, and they alternate as driver and runner on each run because they find that their own different personalities result in them relating to some clients better than others. Mr Kerr at first found the deprived social circumstances of some of his clients distressing but he now very much enjoys the contact with people for whom his Meals on Wheels visit may be their only human contact for the day. He says the volunteers will often develop affection for particular clients and get to know their likes, dislikes and particular foibles. He now wants to expand the amount of time he gives to volunteering and may employ his educational skills to teach English to immigrants newly arrived to Sydney.

On the other hand, Yili Gui, who is known as Ely Koo, is an immigrant to Sydney and a Meals on Wheels runner. He enjoys practising his English with both clients and drivers. He is very appreciative of the new life that Australia gave him and his wife after they emigrated from China in 1996. Ely Koo has been with Meals on Wheels since 2000, having sought the service out because he didn't have enough to do. He says the work has been both good for society and good for him. The drivers have taught him to say that although he is Chinese-born, he is 'a dinki-dy Aussie at heart'. He is physically strong and although over seventy says that when the lifts break down in high rise buildings (as they often do) he has no difficulty running up and down several flights of stairs to deliver meals to his clients. He also likes to provide



them with assistance with small chores such as removing rubbish and posting letters.

Pauline O'Halloran is often Ely Koo's driver (and informal English teacher) and also the longest serving current volunteer in the City of Sydney's Meals on Wheels service. She began delivering meals several decades ago at the invitation of a couple of golfing friends and describes herself as a 'healthy eighty year old' who intends to continue working for Meals on Wheels as long as possible. Although she has had a degree of attention as a result of her volunteering longevity Mrs O'Halloran says she gets as much out of the work as she gives; and that it is not so much selflessness that motivates her as personal satisfaction and an awareness of her own relatively privileged life. She remembers with fondness the early days of volunteering, when fresh meat for cats was also part of the Meals on Wheels service because some clients would forgo their own meal to give it to a much loved pet. There was also more time and opportunity to meet other volunteers. After they had completed their daily runs volunteers would take turns making sandwiches for one another and would gather around a table for lunch like a big happy family.

Craig Morris and Linda Stangherlin are corporate professionals - Marketing and Communications Director and State Manager respectively - from the Russell Investment Group, a financial services company in the CBD. Russell's parent company in the US has a strong tradition of giving to the community in various forms, including broad-based community initiatives such as Meals on Wheels. Mr Morris and Ms Stangherlin are part of a team of sixty Russell employees who are runners for Meals on Wheels on a weekly rotating roster

and the company has more people wanting to volunteer than can be accommodated by the roster. The benefits of delivering Meals on Wheels are two-way, they say. Whilst clients receive nutritious meals and regular checks on their welfare, the people from Russell learn more about working as a team and about one another. Mr Morris and Ms Stangherlin say that Russell employees are well-educated, high income, privileged people and that visiting Meals on Wheels clients is not only a way to 'give back' but that it also helps keep them and others in the company 'grounded'.

It reminds you that 'life's not too bad', Mr Morris says, and Ms Stangherlin says it has encouraged young colleagues to develop empathy towards the problems of the elderly, of which they might otherwise have been unaware.

Gwen Cordner is current coordinator of the 'Old Grammarians', a group of women who live in Sydney but attended the same school as girls in Melbourne. The Grammarians have been contributing as an organisation since the Meals on Wheels service's inception in Sydney, but so many of them have been replaced by non-Grammarians, such as daughters and friends of original members, that the group's title has become something of a misnomer. Mrs Cordner recalls that since





Volunteer Laraine Kelly serves a meal in a client's kitchen.  
Photo: Sharon Hickey.

she began with Meals on Wheels in Sydney that the general standard of housing, and thus standard of living, has improved significantly and that many of the people she visited in the early days were living in dwellings little better than 'hovels'. She remembers that in earlier decades Grammarians and other volunteers did more than just deliver meals; they set up tables and served meals in Council activity centres and organised Christmas parties (personally donating all the food and drink) for clients. They also held raffles to raise funds for bus trips for Meals on Wheels clients. Mrs Cordner delivered for Meals on Wheels in Melbourne before she came to Sydney and continues to deliver for Willoughby City Council as well as the City of Sydney.

Whilst most clients are extremely appreciative of the Meals on Wheels service, indeed they often give gifts of various kinds to volunteers, volunteers also need a high level of tolerance. They occasionally have food thrown at them and parking is a chronic problem in inner city areas. Volunteers may also occasionally find that a client they are fond of has died since they last visited. Mrs Crawley was saddened to discover a favourite woman client dead, sitting upright on a comfortable chair on the balcony. As always, the client's dining table was set in readiness for the meal, with a linen and lace tablecloth, a knife and fork, and a beautiful china plate. Volunteers have occasionally been held up for the small amounts of money they collect from their clients and one volunteer even managed to stumble in on an armed robbery but delivered the meal and departed none the wiser. Volunteers are also sometimes harassed by people demanding meals they aren't entitled to. The famous Sydney eccentric Bea Miles made regular demands for meals from volunteers delivering around Kings Cross.



Background:  
Volunteers Lionel Evans  
and Prudence Docker.  
Photo: Sharon Hickey.

Mr Mark Spruhan is Manager of Aged, Disability and Food Services (of which Meals on Wheels is a part) for the City of Sydney. He says that although the supply of volunteers can often be quite bountiful, the service also runs short at times so taxi drivers are employed to make sure that meal deliveries still occur. The service is routinely checked to ensure it meets the diverse needs of its clients. These needs may be health related: individual meals will have to be suitable for diabetics or cardiac patients, for instance; or social such as culturally appropriate services for Indigenous people, or ethnically diverse food for an ethnically diverse population. Overall, the service is able to meet most people's needs. Mr Spruhan is anticipating big changes in the Meals on Wheels service in the next couple of decades as the large baby boomer generation ages and impacts on client numbers, and also brings with it food tastes quite different to those of their predecessors.



A: Mary Hutchinson. Photo: Sharon Hickey.  
B: Meals delivery 1970. Photo: City of Sydney Archives.  
C: Volunteers ready to deliver Christmas hampers 1981.  
Photo: City of Sydney Archives.  
D: Workers preparing meals for distribution. Photo: Sharon Hickey.



Thanks are due to the participants in the Meals on Wheels Oral History Project, pictured above. Gwen Cordner, Thelma Crawley, Yili Gui, Graham Kerr, Pauline O'Halloran and Mark Spruhan. Photos: Roslyn Sharp. Linda Stangherlin and Craig Morris. Photos: Russell Investment Group.