

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT: A HANDBOOK FOR VOLUNTEER FAMILIES

Metro Meals on Wheels (MMOW)



An easy introduction to get your family started on volunteering with the  
Twin Cities Meals on Wheels program.

Dear Family Volunteer,

Welcome! This guide is designed for Twin Cities' families with children who are interested in helping us deliver meals to the homebound. Serving together in the community is an ideal opportunity to pass on the values of kindness, caring and empathy to children, while at the same time creating a new generation of volunteers and generous, thoughtful adults. We're delighted that you want to volunteer with us.

Metro Meals on Wheels (MMOW) encompasses 40 partner programs, each dedicated to ensuring that every member of the community has access to nutritious meals so he or she can continue living independently. MMOW assists local programs with volunteer recruitment, grant-making, advocacy and more.

MMOW's member programs served more than 1,145,580 meals to 8,580 homebound individuals in 2008. They assist those who are unable to prepare nutritious meals for themselves because of age, illness or disability. No one is denied a meal because of an inability to pay. It's our volunteers that make this critical service possible.

But volunteers do more than simply deliver a meal. They also provide a quick check-in, a connection to the community and a warm smile. Often, the volunteer is the only person homebound folks see all day. And when children are part of the delivery team, our clients are especially pleased.

We believe that the meal recipient isn't the only one who benefits when families deliver meals together. We think you will, too. While contributing to the community, you'll be teaching your children important values and spending quality time with them. To make the experience even more meaningful for your children, you can chat about the difference you're making and about issues of community responsibility, respect for individual differences, and healthy nutrition. This guide will provide the tools you need to spark those discussions and deepen your volunteer experience.

Many thanks for your invaluable help.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Patrick Rowan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and "R".

Patrick Rowan  
Executive Director  
Metro Meals on Wheels

“Meals on Wheels has been a wonderful hands-on volunteer experience for our family. Our boys are 3, 5 and 7 so it's very age-appropriate as well. Not only do they enjoy delivering the meals but since we deliver in our own neighborhood (most homes are less than a mile from our house) they've come to understand that we have neighbors in need. We drive by a couple homes en route to our 3 year old's preschool and he's always quick to point out "there's Ailene's house!" I've also explained to the boys that they may be the only kids that these older people get to see so I think that also makes the experience more special for them—and helps them understand the reason for the big smiles on the recipients' faces when we arrive with their meal. Another perk for them is the bowl of suckers at the Meals on Wheels site and the warm greeting they always receive from the staff there.”

*-Kim Schneider, volunteer C.E.S. Meals on Wheels*

“Meals on Wheels is a well-established program that made it easy for our family to slip into a mutually beneficial routine of community service. Already we see the seeds of compassion, patience, and acceptance growing in our four-year-old who has been delivering meals once a week since he was two. We have made many friends of all ages, cultures, and beliefs by delivering Meals on Wheels and this has broadened our perspective and the way we look at the world. Meals on Wheels has been a great way to start teaching our son the value of community and his role in making a positive difference in the lives of others.”

*-Tami Lee, volunteer*

## **GETTING TO KNOW THE ISSUES**

The more you know about an issue, the more effective you will be when giving back. Volunteering as a Meals on Wheels driver provides an opportunity to teach your child (and learn yourself!) more about:

- the importance of giving and serving
- the value of civic responsibility
- healthy nutrition and local hunger
- issues of aging and seniors
- disability awareness

If you homeschool your child, this handbook can be used as a guide for a service-learning experience, combining service to others with academic learning. For all families, it's an opportunity to gain knowledge and expand your understanding of the world.

To set the stage for your volunteer experience, brainstorm with your child about how we can learn more about the issues we care about. You family might want to:

- Find organizations and websites that have information on the topic. We recommend some possibilities.
- Go to the library and read books about the issue. We provide some good lists in this handbook.
- Talk to experts in your community and ask what's happening locally and globally.
- Converse with friends and family about what you've learned. Listen as they share their experiences and perspectives, too.

## GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE

Doing service projects like delivering with Meals on Wheels expands a child's civic awareness, compassion for others, and desire to be engaged in the community.

Reflect together on the difference you're making when you deliver meals. Explain why you spend time together contributing to the community. Perhaps giving back is a reflection of your family's values. Perhaps you want to demonstrate that kindness matters.

Talk about *why* delivering meals helps your community and its members.

- You are delivering food that seniors and people with disabilities need to stay healthy.
- You're reducing isolation, giving homebound folks an opportunity to socialize, and checking to see that someone is fine.
- The world is a better place when we help one another. Describe other ways you've helped in the community and times when your family has needed assistance and how others have been there for you.

Also discuss how community engagement benefits you and your family.

- Research shows that people who do kind deeds are happier and healthier.
- Explain how nice it is to have a special time when you can be together, doing something meaningful.
- Delivering meals enables you to meet members of your community you didn't know before.

### Children's books on kindness, giving and serving

***The Berenstain Bears Lend a Helping Hand*** by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House Books for Young Readers, 1998). Ages 4-8. Brother and Sister learn about the rewards of kindness when they help the elderly Widow McGrizz.

***Chicken Soup for Little Souls: The Goodness Gorillas*** by Lisa McCourt (Health Communications, Inc., 1997). Ages 4-8. This story teaches the importance of reaching out to others – even the class bully.

***The Giving Book: Open the Door to a Lifetime of Giving*** by Ellen Sabin (Watering Can, 2004). Ages 4-11. An interactive book that encourages children to give back to the community.

***Kids' Random Acts of Kindness*** by Dawna Markova (Conari Press, 1994). Ages 4-8. Stories of loving kindness written by kids of all ages.

***The Three Questions*** by Jon J. Muth (Scholastic Press, 2002). Ages 4-8. Based on a short story by Leo Tolstoy, this is the story of a little boy's quest to discover the secret to being a good person.

## YOU'LL LEARN ABOUT HEALTHY NUTRITION, TOO!

Delivering meals together provides an opportunity to talk to your children about the importance of good nutrition. It can be as simple as explaining the differences between healthy and less healthy foods and drinks, such as the degree of salt, sugar and fat. Remind your children that everyone is happier and healthier when they eat nutritious food!

For some Meals on Wheels recipients, the hot meal they receive may be the only nutritious one they eat all day. A recent report said, "Hunger is a serious public health threat facing hundreds of thousands of seniors in America." If your child is old enough, talk about hunger issues – both locally and globally.

Here are some questions to jumpstart your food conversations:

- What kinds of foods are nutritious? What health foods do you enjoy eating?
- Why do some folks need special diets? Why is it important to give them food to meet their needs?
- Have you ever been hungry and had to wait to get food? How did it feel?
- Do you think we should help feed the hungry both in the United States and in other countries, too? If so, what could we do?

Here are some other activities to extend your conversations about nutrition and hunger:

- Take a hunger quiz at <http://www.wfp.org/node/19175>
- Expand your vocabulary and make a free contribution at [www.freerice.com](http://www.freerice.com)
- Learn about healthy eating at <http://coolfoodplanet.org/>
- Visit [www.hungersolutions.org](http://www.hungersolutions.org), which explains more about hunger issues and tells what we can do to make a difference.

## Children's books about hunger and healthy nutrition

***The Can-Do Thanksgiving*** by Marion Hess Pomeranc; illustrated by Nancy Cote (Albert Whitman & Company, 1998). Ages 4-8. When Dee's school participates in a canned goods drive, she and her classmates learn lessons about homelessness and hunger.

### ***Food Fight: Poets Join the Fight Against Hunger with Poems to Favorite Food***

Edited and illustrated by Michael J. Rosen (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1996). Ages 9-12. Thirty-three children's poets contribute to the fight against hunger by penning poems about food. Included are odes to pies, pizza and matzo ball soup!

***The Lady in the Box*** by Ann McGovern; illustrated by Marni Backer (Turtle Books, 1999). Ages 4-8. When Ben and Lizzie meet a homeless woman named Dorrie, they decide to bring her food and warm clothing and eventually volunteer at the soup kitchen where she goes.

### ***Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen*** by Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan (HarperCollins, 1997).

Ages 4-8. A young boy helps out at a soup kitchen and learns from the example of his uncle, who treats all who visit as honored guests.

**What the World Eats** by Faith D'Aluisio; photographed by Peter Menzel (Tricycle Press, 2008). Ages 10 and up. Through colorful photos, maps and recipes, this book profiles families around the world and the foods they eat while raising important questions about the issue of world hunger.

***A Kid's Guide to Hunger and Homelessness: How to Take Action!*** by Cathryn Berger Kaye (Free Spirit Publishing, 2007). Ages 9-12. Find out what kids are doing in their communities to address the problems of hunger and homelessness. Then make your own plan of action.

## THE DELIGHTS OF MEETING OUR ELDERS

Volunteering with MMOW has the happy result of bringing generations together, reducing stereotypes and increasing understanding. Interacting with seniors on a Meals on Wheels route can spark conversations with your children about the value of intergenerational sharing and about honoring the elderly.

Even better, if you are able to drive the same route each week or each month, you'll develop ongoing relationships, letting your child see how similar people are across age, ethnicity and economic background.

Here are some thoughts and questions to help you discuss older people with your child.

- What words come to mind when you think of an elderly person or senior citizen? What makes you think of those words?
- What are some popular stereotypes of older citizens? Why do you think people have those stereotypes?
- Remind your child that as people age, they may have illnesses or disabilities that prevent them from acting like younger people. Talk about what those might be and how you should react to those differences.
- Talk to your child about what seniors have to offer us – their lifelong wisdom, their experience, their mentoring and their stories.

### Children's books about children's friendships with elders

***Effie's Image*** by N.L. Sharp (PrairieLand Press, 2008). Ages 4-8. When 82-year-old Effie decides she no longer has anything to offer the world, a girl named Amanda refuses to let her give up.

***The Friends*** by Kazumi Yumoto (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005). Ages 9-12. This is the tale of an unexpected friendship among three young boys and a wise man that lives in their town.

***I Know a Lady*** by Charlotte Zolotow; illustrated by James Stevenson (Greenwillow Books, 1992). Ages 4-8. A young girl expresses her admiration for a kind-hearted elderly woman who lives in her neighborhood.

***Miss Viola and Uncle Ed Lee*** by Alice Faye Duncan; illustrated by Catherine Stock (Atheneum, 1999). Ages 4-8. A young boy becomes friends with two very different older neighbors in order to bring them together.

***Mrs. Katz and Tush*** by Patricia Polacco (Dragonfly Books, 1994) Ages 4-8. When young Larnel gives a stray kitten to a lonely elderly woman in his neighborhood, they develop a deeply rewarding and long-lasting friendship.

***Old People, Frogs, and Albert*** by Nancy Hope Wilson; illustrated by Marcy D. Ramsey (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999). Ages 4-8. Albert is very uncomfortable around the residents of the nursing home in his community. When his beloved reading tutor has a stroke and moves into the nursing home, however, Albert must overcome his fear.

## FOSTERING AWARENESS OF DISABILITIES

Delivering meals can be an ideal time to teach the lessons of tolerance and respect for differences. You'll meet many kinds of people as a Meals on Wheels volunteer, and it's normal for kids to have questions about those whom they perceive as being different. You can point out that people are more alike than different, and that all people deserve respect and understanding.

Here are some tips for talking to your children about the people you serve on your route.

- If your children notice someone has a disability, answer their questions honestly, but don't make a big deal about differences. Talk about respect for others, despite outward differences in age, abilities or appearance.
- Explain that all of us have different kinds and levels of abilities. Some of us are fast runners while others have trouble walking, some can read easily while others have difficulty learning, and some can sing while others can't carry a tune.
- Don't allow your child to make jokes about people with disabilities, and be careful not to make similar comments yourself. Emphasize that there is nothing funny about people who do things differently and that those kinds of jokes can be hurtful.
- Talk about how your child would feel if they were in that situation, and how they'd want someone to act.
- Be aware of the language you use when talking about people with disabilities. Avoid negative words, such as "crippled" or "handicapped."

### Children's books about disability awareness

***All About My Brother*** by Sarah Peralta (Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2002). Ages 4-8. A young girl introduces the reader to her younger brother, who is autistic. The book was written and illustrated by 8-year-old Sarah Peralta.

***Best Friend on Wheels*** by Debra Shirley (Albert Whitman, 2008). Ages 4-8. When the narrator's teacher asks her to show the new girl around school, she is nervous because the girl is in a wheelchair. When the two girls begin to talk, however, they find that they are more alike than different.

***Don't Call Me Special: A First Look at Disability*** by Pat Thomas (Barron's Educational Series, 2005). Ages 4-8. This reassuring book answers common questions and concerns about disability and children with special needs.

***A Rainbow of Friends*** by P.K. Hallinan (Ideals Children's Books, 2006). Ages 4-8. This simple book teaches children about accepting differences and celebrating diversity.

## **A CHECKLIST FOR STARTING OUT**

When you're ready to deliver meals with your child, here are some ways to ensure that it's a wonderful, rewarding experience.

### PREPARING YOUR CHILD

If your child is prepared for the volunteer experience, you're more likely to have fun and enjoy yourself. First, talk about why you decided to take on a Meals on Wheels route. Here are some additional preparation tips.

- Consider going on the route once by yourself before bringing along your child. That way you can explain exactly what it will be like before you start out.
- Talk to your child about the different kinds of people you're likely to meet. Some of the folks may be friendly and talkative. Others won't want to visit with you. Some will be elderly, while others are ill or have disabilities.
- Also talk about the different kinds of houses and apartments you're likely to see. Some may be quite small and others large. Some may be messy or even smell bad.
- If you have a younger child, practice knocking on a door at home and saying (loudly) "Meals on Wheels." Also, depending on the age of your child, you might want to practice gently handing over a meal.
- Also explain that once you ring the doorbell or knock loudly, you may have to wait a bit. It takes some elderly folks or people with disabilities a long time to get to the door. Talk to your child about the importance of being patient.
- Go over the basic rules of etiquette, such as saying hello when you arrive, saying good-bye when you leave, and using Mrs. or Mr. (rather than first names) when addressing the folks you serve.
- Explain that some elders may be hard of hearing. Remind your child to speak slowly and loud enough for the clients to hear.
- Talk about the fact that since you signed up for a route, folks are counting on you. So even if you'd rather not go one day – because it's cold and rainy or you're having fun playing with a friend – it's important to follow through on your commitment. This is a great opportunity to have a conversation about responsibility.

### TIPS FOR HAVING FUN AND DOING WELL

Doing a Meals on Wheels route together each week or each month provides a lot of teachable moments. Here are some tips for making the experience both educational and enjoyable.

- Take time to get to know the folks on your route. Spend a few minutes visiting with those that are interested.
- Invite a friend to join you on your route. You just might convince someone else to deliver meals, too!
- If you have young children, bring along toys in the car to keep them entertained. You also might want to consider packing water and a few snacks.
- If some of your clients have special diets, talk to your child about how important it is to get them the kind of food they need.

- Share the route map with your child. Let your child help you find the way from one house to another.
- Consider making a day of it. Go out for a picnic or have cocoa afterward at your favorite coffee shop. This will also give you an opportunity to reflect with your child on your experiences.

### FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Have some questions about how volunteering with your child or children might work? Here are some answers from the experts – other parents who are delivering meals with their kids.

***I'm worried about getting my kids in and out of their car seats. Are there ways to make this easier?***

Many programs offer opportunities to deliver all the route's meals inside an apartment building. That way, getting your child in and out of a car seat won't be an issue. If you have questions about this, contact MMOW's volunteer coordinator at [info@meals-on-wheels.com](mailto:info@meals-on-wheels.com) or call 612.623.3363.

***My kids are in school at lunch time during the week. Can delivering meals work as a family volunteer experience for us?***

Absolutely. One idea is to deliver the meals yourself when they're in school, and then talk about your experiences. And you'll be able to take them along during the summer or when they have school breaks.

***What's the youngest age child you would recommend bringing along on a delivery route?***

If you're the only adult, you might want to wait until your child can get out of the car and walk to the door unaided. However, if you and another parent deliver together, you can take turns going to the door with your child or children, no matter what their ages.

***Will our family have the same route each time we volunteer?***

Your family can request to have the same route each time you volunteer to deliver meals and the program coordinator will do their best to accommodate your request.

## **CARRYING YOUR EXPERIENCES INTO YOUR DAILY LIFE**

Now that you and your children are volunteering to deliver meals together, you've probably come to realize the difference you're making in your community and also have begun to think more deeply about issues like hunger, good nutrition, helping seniors and people with disabilities, and the value of giving back. That's great! Now here are some ways to continue to extend and enrich your volunteer adventure.

### TALK AND REFLECT

You can have many conversations with your child about what you're doing to help in the community. Remember that reflection fosters the development of critical thinking in children and can stimulate some interesting discussions. So talk about your experiences in the car while delivering meals, at the dinner table, before bed – anytime!

Consider these questions to jumpstart the conversation.

- Why is it important that we bring meals to elders and people with disabilities in our community?
- What do you think it would feel like to live alone?
- How did you make a difference today?
- Did anything surprise you? If so, what?
- Did anything happen that made you feel uncomfortable?
- What have you learned from delivering meals that you didn't know before?
- What do you like most about delivering meals? What is most difficult part?
- Do you have ideas of what we might do differently to do an even better job?

Here are some other ways to encourage reflection:

- As you are driving at other times and you pass by the houses of the folks you serve, talk about the friends you've made and tell stories about your interactions with them.
- Describe an incident that occurred during your route and talk about it.
- Younger children love to hear the “story” of their experiences told back to them. Make it habit to tell about your meal delivery before your child goes to bed on the night you volunteered. Your child can help you tell the story.

### KEEP A RECORD

Take the opportunity to create a fun, permanent document that describes your family's experiences with Meals on Wheels.

- Create a journal or scrapbook of your Meals on Wheels adventures. You can include quotes, photos, mementos and journal entries. Add something new each time you volunteer.
- Write and illustrate a “book” together about your MOW experience, with your child as the main character. (You can include actual photos or do your own drawings.) Then read the book to your child frequently, and let your child “read” it to others.

- Write a letter together with your child to someone (grandparent, aunt, friend) about your experience. Or have your child describe the experience to someone on the phone.
- Share your Meals on Wheels story on the MMOW website and read your child the stories that other families have written.

### HUNGERING TO DO MORE?

If you and your children are having fun being MMOW volunteers and would like to do even more to help seniors and people with disabilities in your community, here are some ideas

- Encourage others to be Meals on Wheels volunteer drivers.
  - Be a Meals on Wheels “ambassador.” Talk about what you’re doing and what an essential program it is.
  - If the opportunity arises, do “presentations” together (to extended family, a group of seniors or neighbors, at your child’s school, or to your faith group) about your experience as meal deliverers. As children share the story of their experiences, it becomes a part of who they are.
  - Invite a friend to join you on your route sometimes. That might encourage another family to get a route of their own.
  - Let the folks at MMOW know whether you’re willing to talk to media about your experiences. Or be available to other families who are considering delivering meals together to answer their questions and describe your experiences.
  - Share your story on the MMOW website and at the Doing Good Together ([www.doinggoodtogether.org](http://www.doinggoodtogether.org)) website.

- Donate to Metro Meals on Wheels. The organization counts on individual donors to provide meals to folks who need them. Here are some ways your family might donate.

Hold a fundraiser with the proceeds going to MMOW. For more information on family-friendly fundraisers, visit [www.meals-on-wheels.com/family](http://www.meals-on-wheels.com/family)

- Decorate a “Meals on Wheels Giving Box” using a shoebox or coffee can. Put in loose change or give up something each week and feed the savings into your box. When it’s full, donate the money to MMOW.
- Make some neat stuff for the folks on your route or on other routes. And it’s fun for kids to have an additional treat to hand to your meal recipients. Here are some ideas:
  - Placemats
  - Greeting cards
  - “We Care” packages
  - Fleece blankets

Learn more about how to create each of these items at: [www.meals-on-wheels.com/family](http://www.meals-on-wheels.com/family)

- Brainstorm ideas about how else you might help the hungry, elders or people with disabilities in your community. Listen carefully to what your child has to say and see if your family can implement some of the ideas.