

In the Right Direction

Summer 2009

On June 16, 2009, the Wood County town of Yantis officially became the region's newest community senior meal site. City, County, ETCOG and Tradition's Restaurant officials officially opened the meal site by cutting a yellow dedication ribbon and enjoying a tasty and nutritious meal with the area's seasoned citizens. Numerous client customers sought me out during the event to express gratitude for the exceptional quality of the meals and the hospitality and kindness of staff. Credit and praise for the quality of the food belongs to Tyler's own Tradition's Restaurant, an esteemed new member of ETCOG's Senior Nutrition Program team.



Even though Yantis is one of the regions smallest cities, it now enjoys the distinction of hosting the largest community meal site in all of East Texas. The average number of daily meals served at the site currently stands at a whopping seventy-nine (79)! The Yantis community meal site grand opening is one of the initial steps of ETCOG's overall strategy to strengthen the Senior Nutrition Program while simultaneously improving meal quality.

Two years ago, the Senior Nutrition Program comprised of both home-delivered and congregate/community meals were administered through three ETCOG/AAA contractors. Ten of our fourteen counties were served by one contractor and the remaining four counties were split evenly by the remaining contractors. Participation in the congregate/community based meal program that was intended to afford seniors an opportunity to connect and socialize together had dwindled to the point that the program, in most counties (including Wood), was on life support. More alarming was the fact that no contingency plan existed in the event that any one of the existing contractors should fail. Even if such a plan existed, the entire Senior Nutrition Program relied on three meal providers, with primary reliance on one contractor that administered the program in ten counties. Our region simply did not have a sufficient number of strong meal contractors in the system to begin building a reasonable system back up plan.

About eighteen months ago, ETCOG/AAA staff began to take action to proactively address these systemic issues. Our objective once again is to strengthen the program and improve the quality of the service. We began the process of strengthening the system by adding a new meal contractor to the system and by reassigning county service responsibilities among the expanded contractor base. By contracting with Tradition's Restaurant for the Wood County pilot, we have expanded the contractor base yet again, and at least in Yantis we have improved the quality of the meal service with stellar results. Customers have a tendency to vote for a quality service with their feet.

By this fall, we hope to expand this community/congregate meal model to several other willing Wood County communities. As of this writing, we still have a long way to go before our Senior Nutrition Program objectives are fully achieved, but we have certainly moved a step or two in the right direction. Just ask our customers in Yantis.