

Helping People Live

MANNA, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit, feeds chronically ill people in the city and surrounding counties.

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Sue Daugherty, RD, LDN, has a lot of hungry mouths to feed. As CEO of the Philadelphia-based MANNA, a nonprofit that feeds chronically ill people, she leads an army of staff and volunteers who in 2024 prepared and delivered over 1,300,000 medically tailored meals in the city and surrounding counties.

Daugherty, who started working at MANNA in 1999 as a dietitian, has watched the group evolve from an organization feeding Philadelphians living with HIV into a behemoth that serves anyone in greater Philadelphia, southern New Jersey and beyond who is at nutritional risk because of chronic cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney disease, HIV or AIDS.

“In the mid-’90s, it was like, ‘They have AIDS, tell them to eat whatever they want,’” Daugherty recalls. “This was a time when people were dying [at a high rate]. In 1999, when I joined MANNA, effective treatment was on the market.” And those new medications meant new side effects.

“I was counseling one of my HIV-positive patients whose triglyceride level was off the charts,” Daugherty says. “Turns out, that’s an unfortunate side effect of early HIV meds. It was the first time I was exposed to this metabolic disorder. I remember watching the gooey mac and cheese coming out of our kitchen and thinking that something needs to change. That’s when we shifted from helping people die to helping people live.”

Hence, MANNA pivoted from cooking comfort food for the dying to preparing medically tailored meals for terminally ill clients living longer lives. Daugherty’s rationale: If you’re not eating right, you won’t heal or thrive. And thanks to MANNA’s commitment to researching the benefits of nutritional science, “food is medicine” is more than a mantra.

The proof is in the health care savings. Says Daugherty: “A research study published at Tufts University a couple years ago showed that if everyone in the country who was prescribed a

medically tailored meal had access to that meal, after the cost of the intervention, the projected savings was \$38 billion a year.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, President Trump’s budget priorities affect MANNA and its clients, many of whom are on Medicaid.

According to Daugherty, MANNA receives close to \$1 million a year in Ryan White funds specifically to serve its clients living with HIV, a cohort that makes up 8% of MANNA’s clientele. But Daugherty, who deftly navigated MANNA through the COVID-19 pandemic, won’t let Trump’s funding cuts keep her from serving.

“We’re hosting a roundtable discussion with our corporate foundations and higher-end donors to talk about [Trump’s budget cuts], and we’re doing more philanthropic outreach and looking at potential diversified funding streams,” she explains.

Daugherty’s advocacy also includes trips to Washington, DC, and to Pennsylvania’s capital, Harrisburg, to urge lawmakers to expand insurance coverage for MANNA’s services. Those efforts led to a pioneering agreement with an insurance company to cover the costs of MANNA meals for clients with diabetes, something Daugherty is keen to build upon.