

# Sharing Food with Alone Seniors

“Sharing a Meal, Caring  
for All”<sup>1</sup>

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Community-based programmes that promote social connections among neighbours are a common response to helping community-dwelling older adults who are experiencing social isolation.

Older adults who live alone represent one population group that is at risk of social isolation. These adults may have fewer opportunities than those who co-habitat to interact socially with others. The lack of social interaction may cause older people to experience feelings of loneliness and even exhibit symptoms of depression. Even though living alone is a risk factor for social isolation, it is important to note that not all people who live alone are lonely. People living with family members can also experience emotional difficulties and loneliness.

The Casserole Club in Australia and the Share-a-Pot programme in Singapore, represent meal sharing models for promoting social connections among older people.

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<sup>1</sup> This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

## *Casserole Club, Australia*

*“Doing something great with an extra plate”*

Casserole Club is a social, meal sharing programme that is based on the Meals-on-Wheels model, which originated in 1943 in Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, England. Meals-on-Wheels delivers meals to people who are unable to prepare their own food. It is so called because the hot meals are traditionally delivered by wheels - in old prams and covered by old felt hats in order to keep the meals warm during transit.

Casserole Club has been developed in Victoria, Australia, since October 2014 following the UK Casserole Club model. It is initiated and funded by public service innovation agency, FutureGov Australia. The club aims to connect people who like to cook and are happy to share an extra portion of their home cooked meal with older neighbours who are in need to of social interaction and assistance with meal preparation.

Designed and piloted in partnership with three local councils in Melbourne, Casserole Club provides a platform for residents to match their personal interests with volunteering. These councils are Macedon Ranges Shire Council, Boroondara Council and the Moreland City Council. A \$7000 per annum license fee is paid to a US company who owns the franchise license. The club helps to strengthen existing connections, or establish new friendships, between neighbours.

Challenges were encountered during the implementation phase, e.g. with the method for signing up new members,

safeguards for protecting existing members from exploitation or abuse. New members join the club by entering their details on an online sign-up form hosted on a website. It was found that many older people, and especially the oldest old, did not have access to the Internet. Thus, the web-based method of signing up operated as a barrier to participation. The club sought to reduce this barrier by assisting potential members to register. They did this by partnering with local organisations in rollout areas and having the helpers identify people who might benefit from being involved in the club, then registering that person, with their consent.

The process whereby a volunteer cooks and visits the home of older person to share a meal poses some potential safety concerns. This is addressed by requiring the volunteer cooks to pass a mandatory safeguarding process. They undergo a Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) check before they are introduced to the members. The check includes verifying the identity and local residence of volunteer cooks. The club also provides additional forms of support in facilitating interactions between club participants. Members of the Casserole Club are contactable via phone and email to ensure the smooth communication and welfare of both the members and the volunteer cooks.

Information on the Casserole Club website indicated that approximately 70% of older people who received meals through the club regarded their volunteer cooks as friends, while 80% expressed they had experienced increased social contact.

## Share-a-Pot, Singapore

Share-a-Pot is a community-based project in Singapore that marries nutrition and physical activity in a social environment to improve the overall wellbeing of community-dwelling seniors.

The concept was piloted at St. Luke's Eldercare Centre in 2014. It is based on a philosophy of "Building Brain, Brawn, Bones and Bonds" (see Box 1) and targets outcomes in the physical, social and mental domains of health.

### Box 1: Building Brain, Brawn, Bones and Bonds



(Image Credit: Share-a-pot)

Components of the philosophy – Brains, Brawn, Bones and Bonds.

Bones and broth refer to both building stronger muscles and bonds through high protein and high calcium meals, and exercising to reduce falls.

Building brain addresses the cognitive reserve of older adults through social engagement.

The project also seeks to support vulnerable populations through engaging them in meaningful activities while injecting local plug and play features in meeting the needs of senior participants.

Source: Share-a-pot, n.d.

Share-a-Pot seeks to create, evoke and replicate memories of family reunions,

where members of the family would traditionally gather around a pot of nutritious soup. Thus, a key aspect of the programme is the creation of a warm atmosphere in a setting that encourages older people to meet and socialise.

Volunteerism is encouraged. Market-stall owners and other community members contribute in varying ways to the programme. For example, stakeholders help to fund the purchase of ingredients, and volunteer in the planning and coordination of the programme. Involvement of local stakeholders ensures the programme's continuity and long-term sustainability.

Another aspect is health monitoring. The programme runs on a 12-week cycle to facilitate regular monitoring of participant health.

### More than a bowl of soup

In addition to consuming and socialising around a nutritious and hot bowl of soup, older adults are encouraged to take ownership of their fitness and physical health. They are provided with exercise routines that are designed to stimulate muscle synthesis over a long duration and are given a pedometer to track their daily steps. Older adults who track and clock the targeted number of daily steps receive stamps that can be exchanged for small tokens of participation.

### Going digital

In encouraging members to adopt a healthy lifestyle and to eat well and exercise outside of the organised gatherings, soup recipes and instructions on how to perform simple exercises are

made available on an official website (<https://www.shareapot.sg/>). Examples of exercise instructions online include, sit-to-stand, side leg raise and forward punches.

The soup recipes are posted on the website. They are nutritious, simple and easy to follow, and cater to different tastes and cuisines, e.g.

- Lotus root peanut soup
- Minestrone soup
- Fish bone noodles soup
- Sweet corn and papaya soup
- Apple and corn soup
- Pumpkin and corn soup.

## Summary

Casserole Club in Australia and Share-a-Pot in Singapore are some examples of community-based initiatives that use food as a basis to bring older people and the community together. These programmes seek to expand the social networks of older adults within their immediate neighbourhood. Local social networks including those among neighbours, are seen as serving a critical role in supporting older people, both emotionally and socially.

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