

# The Times-Picayune

## Donald Trump wants to starve old people? A story too good to check.

Tim Morris

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You probably saw lots of stories over the weekend about how President Donald Trump's budget would gut the Meals on Wheels program, threatening the delivery of hot meals to some of society's most vulnerable, including the aging veterans population.

Several prominent news websites, including USA Today, ran headlines along the lines of "Trump's Budget Would Kill a Program That Feeds 2.4 Million Senior Citizens."

"Late Night" host Seth Meyers featured the issue on his "Closer Look" current events segment Thursday (March 16).

"How dead inside do you have to be to not want old people to get food?" Meyers asked. "Your heart is so small it makes your tiny hands look like catcher mitts."

The coverage was so intense that supporters of Meals on Wheels showered the nonprofit organization with more than \$100,000 in donations over a two-day period. The program says it typically receives about \$1,000 a day in unsolicited online donations.

That's a really good thing. And even better news is that the reporting is misleading at best and wrong at worst. That is good for Meals on Wheels, not so good for journalism.

The National Review's Walter Olson was among the first to call the story "false" and note that "it wouldn't have taken long for reporters to find and provide some needed context to the relationship between federal block grant programs, specifically Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), and the popular Meals on Wheels program."

"I started on the organization's own website," Olson writes. "From Thursday's conversation in the press, it was easy to assume that block grant programs -- CDBG and similar block grants for community services and social services -- are the main source of federal funding for Meals on Wheels. Not so. Instead, as the national site explains, the major source of federal funding for the programs, accounting for 35 percent of overall local budgets, comes through the Sixties-era Older Americans Act. (Local programs also obtain support from state and county governments, private donors, and so on.)"

Mick Mulvaney, the Office of Management and Budget director, said that the funding source the administration seeks to eliminate -- the Department of Housing and Urban Development's community development block grants -- accounts for just 3 percent of Meals on Wheels' overall funding, according to the Washington Post.

"Some of the stories are just either grossly wrong or nearly grossly wrong, all the stories about how we cut Meals on Wheels," Mulvaney said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press."

The Post said OMB spokesman John Czwartacki said later that Mulvaney meant to say that Meals on Wheels' national headquarters gets 3 percent of its funding from the government and that he was not referring to the amount of funding that comes from community development block grants. It is unclear what percentage of the program's funding comes from HUD, but it is a relatively small amount.

Meals on Wheels is not a federal program, nor do its local groups directly receive federal funding, the Post said. Rather, the groups run on a mix of local, state and federal money, as well as private donations and the work contributions of volunteers, which vary depending on the funding structure of each affiliate.

There also were reports that the White House budget director had said that Meals on Wheels was "just not showing results"? The Washington Post's fact checker wrote Friday that "it appears his comments have been misinterpreted."

So, there will likely be reductions for local Meals on Wheels programs, but not a destruction of the program.

The myth-busting website Snopes rated the original reports of Meals on Wheels a "mixture" of truth and error.

"All in all, some local Meals on Wheels groups will likely have to make up revenue shortfalls through alternative sources or cut back on their services if funding cuts are made to the CDBG program and HHS, but the national Meals on Wheels program itself won't be shut down," the website reported.