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Celebrating 70 Years of Meals on Wheels in Australia

There is plenty to be read about how Meals on Wheels came into existence in Australia in 1953; in particular the formidable woman who began the humble service that now reaches across our nation. We would like to acknowledge that the bulk of the following information is from the online newsletter 'The Conversation' which posted an article to recognize the 70th Year of Meals on Wheels in Australia. It's a wonderful story about an inspirational woman.

Doris Taylor was, by all accounts, a force of nature. Wheelchair bound from several childhood accidents her mother fought to keep her from being institutionalized, insisting she remain at home. Doris was determined to become a useful member of society, she had no time for self-pity, according to Meals on Wheels historian Michael Cudmore. *"We are in the world to help each other,"* she would say.

After witnessing a child struggling without food during the Great Depression, she initiated a soup kitchen at that school to provide food for any student who needed it. She also became secretary of the Mothers' Club at a local kindergarten organising events to raise money to buy new clothes for the children and food vouchers for their families.

An enthusiastic member of her local branch of the ALP, Taylor served as secretary on various committees and helped to organise a house-to-house survey of local housing conditions. She also worked with trade unions, representing them on the Good Neighbour Council, set up to assist newly arrived European migrants in the post-war years.

An adept one-fingered typist, Taylor spent most of her days writing on a small portable typewriter and answering a telephone mounted on an arm near her bed. She was an "organising genius", cultivating a long list of contacts in the media and politics, some of whom learnt the hard way never to underestimate her. *"Her telephone is one of the busiest in Adelaide,"* a News journalist noted in 1958. *"She works from 7am to 11pm, guiding and directing by phone, letter and talks at meetings and clubs."* Observers marvelled at the long distances she travelled, in all weather, steering her petrol-powered wheelchair with her shoulders.

Widely and "extremely well-read" in politics, philosophy, literature and the arts, Taylor taught herself several languages, including Russian. She also found time to read twice a week to a blind ex-schoolmaster.

In 1952, as secretary of the West Norwood ALP sub-branch, Taylor decided Don Dunstan was the right candidate to win the seat of Norwood and achieve the radical reforms she wanted to see in South Australia. Dunstan recalled how she managed his first election campaign "in her own inimitable way".

But Taylor's major concerns were always for the aged, the housebound and the disabled. She felt a tremendous empathy for elderly people who were being forced out of their homes and into institutions. After World War II, she joined the South Australian Pensioners' League, becoming its public relations officer. *"The idea of a Home for the Aged seems quite wrong to me,"* she wrote in 1955.





Kerryn Williams
Manager

More
than just
a meal

From the Manager's Desk....

Hello everyone,

It's been a very busy winter here and spring has arrive early! In addition to our usual flow of activity, some of you may have noticed a staffing change. Tanya has moved on from our office and we welcome our new Administration Officer and Volunteer Coordinator **Danielle** to the team.

As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of Meals on Wheels commencing in Australia, we reflect on our own beginnings here in Armidale in 1966 and you can be sure we will celebrate our own 60th birthday in style in 2026!

Some of you may recall a survey issued to all volunteers and clients of our service on the **Social Impact** of Meals on Wheels. The idea was to capture data around what we already know but has not been quantified in the past. The Social benefits for our clients of having a regular and trusted visitor to their home, bringing a nutritious meal and a friendly smile. Also, for the volunteers the fulfilment and community connection they gain from the simple yet generous gift of time and service to those who need a little help at home.

We will provide some of the findings from the report as it does make for very interesting reading, but is also quite long! Multiple MOW services in NSW were surveyed with hundreds of responses from both clients and volunteers providing a broad range of answers to review.

You will probably not be surprised to learn that 93% of the volunteers said their age was over 51yrs; reflecting the dedication our volunteers have, over 40% of respondents have been volunteering for MOW for up to 5 years, 18% for up to 10years, 16% for up to 30yrs and an amazing 8% for OVER 30 years. That's incredible! The data collected and compared to the national average indicated that Meals on Wheels volunteers have a higher level of wellbeing compared to volunteers of ANY other service!

Clients in rural and regional areas indicated a stronger sense of wellbeing and security from their regular service, compared to those living in urban areas. For me, the most interesting data was that the length of time spent with each client makes more difference than the number of visits to a client. Also being able to see the same person regularly makes a big difference to social connection.

We will continue to do our best to keep our drivers on their regular runs when we can, and we hope each of our volunteers can take a few minutes to stop for a chat - but not for too long if they're running late.

This small gift of precious time is what makes us MORE than Just a Meal!

Kerryn Williams, **Manager**

In Memoriam

Our condolences and thoughts to the loved ones of the following clients whom we have been proud to serve whether it be for a long time or a short time, recently or a while ago, who have passed away in the last few months and are all sadly missed. **Other people who have also been involved in our service: Pat Garrahy, Judy Jones (driver)**

Key Denning ~ Frank Neave ~ Harry Holloway ~ Lyn Brent (94) ~ Joy Heffernan ~ Cyril Faint (93) ~ Robert (Bob) Campbell ~ Raymond (Ray) Bennett ~ Mary Royal (96) ~ Pam Douglas ~ Margaret Shuttleworth ~ Anthony (Tony) Hardwick (94) ~ Gwen Newman ~ Wendy Hyde ~ Alan Walsh (92) ~ Tim Nelson ~ Elva Brazier ~

The Inspirational life of Doris Taylor

Continued from front page **Images thanks to Meals on Wheels South Australia.

Medical research confirmed Taylor's suspicions that the elderly deteriorated more rapidly – mentally and physically – when undernourished. And she was “appalled” to discover that hundreds of old people committed to a local psychiatric hospital had been judged to be “quite sane” after just a few weeks of nourishing meals yet were “doomed to end their days in an overcrowded mental hospital” because they had nowhere else to go.

After hearing of home-based meal services operating in England and South Melbourne, home of Australia's first (initially bike-powered) meal delivery service, Taylor struck on the concept for Meals on Wheels. On a wet afternoon in October 1953, she pitched her idea to a meeting of 96 pensioners, paying the rent for the hall from her own pocket.

Those attending were enthusiastic, contributing £5 for initial expenses. Taylor also convinced the local paper owned by a young Rupert Murdoch to get behind the scheme and run a subscription fund. Dunstan, by that time the newly elected member for Norwood, was enlisted to help draft the organisation's constitution and became its first chairman.

From the outset, Taylor was adamant that Meals on Wheels would not be a charity “but a social experiment” users would pay for. The first Meals on Wheels kitchen opened in Port Adelaide on 9 August 1954, operating from a Nissen Hut donated by a local businessman on land provided by the Port Adelaide City Council. Despite the lack of a working sink, 11 “heroic volunteers” prepared and delivered eight meals.

Other kitchens quickly followed at Norwood, Hindmarsh and Woodville. The organisation grew into a statewide body, providing a model for other states and countries to follow. Ten years after it began, Meals on Wheels served its millionth meal.

Taylor devoted the rest of her life to promoting the organisation, giving regular radio broadcasts and addressing hundreds of meetings across Australia. She accomplished this all in a volunteer capacity until the state body of Meals on Wheels appointed her as a paid organiser in 1958. The following year, she was awarded an MBE.

Paying tribute to Taylor's efforts on the tenth anniversary of the organisation, Advertiser journalist Stewart Cockburn observed: “She worked, she talked, she argued, she battered with a ferocity of purpose at the doors of half the leaders of the South Australian community.”

Doris Taylor died on 23 May 1968, aged 66 years, but her legacy lives on. Today, Meals on Wheels delivers in excess of ten million meals to more than 120,000 clients Australia-wide each year. The South Australian electorate of Taylor is named after her.



Birthday Morning Teas

As a way of thanking our valuable volunteers for their time and service, we are now hosting a monthly morning tea for all those whose birthdays fall within that month. A lovely opportunity for strangers to become friends, to meet informally and to share their stories and their common ground as volunteers of our services—all whilst enjoying some scrumptious treats with a freshly barista-made coffee!

It's delightful to see our people connecting and finding many commonalities of shared experiences.

It's a small gesture for us to say **Thank You** to our very dedicated volunteers.

ARMIDALE / URALLA MEALS

On WHEELS INC.

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Office Hours:

Mon to Thurs - 9am to 3pm

Fridays - 9am - 2pm

Closed on Public Holidays



We are a registered Charity under the Australian Charities & Not-for-Profits Commission (ACNC).

Management Committee:

Simon McMillan - President

Maryann Munsie (Uralla) - Vice President

Judy Fisher - 2nd Vice President

Carole Peacock - Treasurer

Natasha Little (Uralla) - Secretary

Committee Members: Martin Hazell / Sandra Stroud

David Breusch / Kimberly Johnston / Barbie Connah

Kerryn Williams - Manager (*ex officio*)

Armidale Uralla Meals on Wheels gratefully receives funding from the federal government under the Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP).

From the President

This issue of our Newsletter is rather special as we pay tribute to Doris Taylor and all the volunteers who have followed in her wheel tracks, and especially our own team of heroes. We simply couldn't operate our service without you.

One thing that the Management Committee is keen to find out is why the number of our active volunteers has declined in recent years, especially since the COVID pandemic. We know that we're all getting older, and some of us are retiring from delivering meals, quite rightly, for a well-earned rest. It turns out, though, that the overall number of registered volunteers has dropped only slightly. It's the level of engagement that has declined. Why? Is it because the person's roster no longer fits their personal schedule? We can fix that! Just let us know.

Have you had a bad experience that has made you decide not to drive for MOW anymore? We'd like to know about it. Please talk to Kerryn or any member of the Committee, in confidence, so that we can work on a solution.

Are you aware of another volunteer dropping out from driving, for whatever reason, and being reluctant to talk to us? Please let them know that we're keen for them to resume driving, and that they can and should talk to us about the reason(s) they stopped. We can't fix what we don't know about.

We are particularly grateful to the core group of volunteers who have put their hands up to fill in on delivery runs during the recent "emergency", sometimes at short notice. What we would really like is for each volunteer to think about and commit to one extra rostered run per month. Added together, those extra commitments could easily get us back on the even keel that seemed to exist three or four years ago.

Simon McMillan

How Many???

In the 2022-2023 financial year, we distributed over 65,000 items from our kitchen. All individually labelled for each person to receive their meal, juice, dessert, salad, sandwich or soup. For a team of 6 people part-time, this is an impressive effort! On top of that we continue to keep you up to date with news through the Senior newspaper, Armidale Times, Uralla Wordsworth and also topped up with fresh tomatoes!