



Pound by Pound and Dollar by Dollar

By revamping the diets of people with developmental disabilities
and the metrics used by social service organizations,
Mainstay is saving lives — and money

In America, poverty and poor nutrition often go hand in hand. Those with low incomes and limited education tend to buy fast food and junk food.

That's also true for some of the cash-strapped provider organizations that support the developmentally disabled, say Jim and Sylvia Vail, both MBA graduates from our nation's top-ranked business school. Struggling under budgetary constraints, ineffective accountability measures and limited knowledge about meal planning and preparation, even the best social service agencies are feeding costly low-quality, high-caloric foods to the people they support. The obesity rate for 6 million people with developmental disabilities is two to three times that of the mainstream population, and related health problems are serious and unnecessarily costing taxpayers an additional \$7,500 per disabled person, per year.

Enter Mainstay, a business started by Jim and Sylvia Vail, that provides products and services to help with this dilemma. Through customized software and reporting mechanisms, on-site interface and a "train the trainer" approach, Mainstay (www.eMainstay.com) impacts both the individual and the organization. Participating social service providers have customized resources to help them plan and prepare tasty, nutritious and economical meals. In fact, under Mainstay's guidelines for healthier eating, breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks and beverages cost less than \$3 a day for each person. Mainstay's full-time, classically-trained chef has been cooking alongside people with developmental disabilities for years; his ongoing involvement guarantees that recipes are appealing and cost-effective, appropriate for a multitude of specialized diets, and easy for staff and clients to prepare. Mainstay's system even generates detailed grocery shopping lists.

According to Jim, organizations that use Mainstay's program cut their food costs by 15 to 20 percent within six months. The program is therefore not only self-funding, but guarantees additional financial upside. In the same timeframe, residents become engaged in the meal process, experience an average weight loss of 12 to 15 pounds, and benefit from a reduction in medication and secondary illnesses such as pre-diabetic conditions.

For the first time ever, providers can track, trend and forecast outcomes related to the health of the people they support and its effect on the organization's bottom line, funding streams and taxpayer expense. Based on those results, Mainstay has set a goal of helping the developmentally disabled population lose 5 million pounds within three to five years — and to help the organizations that support them save \$50 million over the

same period. The burden on Medicaid expense will simultaneously reduce by hundreds of millions of dollars annually due to the preventative health inroads.

Providers that work with Mainstay usually have two objectives in mind: to improve their customers' health and to reduce their operating costs. "But some of the more enlightened agencies realize they can use the health of their customers as leverage in the marketplace," notes Jim. "If they can say to a prospective parent, 'Our residents have a lower obesity rate' or 'Your child should live several years longer with our supports, versus another organization,' that really is a key competitive advantage for a provider." Funders are also responsive to organizations newly capable of proving their value to multiple stakeholders. "Evidence-based payback is vital in today's tight, and getting tighter, funding environment," continues Jim.

The Vails didn't have a background in nutrition when they started Mainstay in the 1990s; their initial motivation was entrepreneurial. Sylvia had recently sold the health care company she started to Fortune 500 Baxter International, and Jim was a former securities analyst for an investment banking firm. Based on the "glaring problems" affecting the social service arena that serendipitously walked into Mainstay's door, their efforts were quickly redirected by a desire to solve critical financial and health care needs. Jim even stepped up to run a faltering nonprofit supporting people with developmental disabilities as a way to understand more and provide immediate help; under his leadership, and after three years, the organization received unprecedented back-to-back CQL accreditations, placing the agency in the top 1% of providers in the country. As part of the agency's revitalization, Jim created a therapeutic day school to teach young adults with developmental disabilities how to live and succeed in their community. This endeavor addressed a gaping void in the market while providing key differentiation and an alternate revenue stream for the provider.

Mainstay's evolution from a prepared-foods delivery business to a measurement-based tool kit of nutrition/meal prep/bottom line improvements not only impacts individuals and social service agencies, but also the broader system. Mainstay has become a voice with authority, and one that is widely respected. "Our primary allegiance is to people with developmental disabilities, and we're outspoken about stakeholders doing much better—faster," the organization underscores on its website. "Self-admittedly, we're impatient about groundless obstacles impeding progress; lives and money are at stake," says Sylvia.

Jim and Sylvia are working in conjunction with the federal government to expand their program to more group home residents and providers in the United States, and they have been instrumental in writing and enacting legislation that now mandates better health through improved nutrition for the disabled population. The Vails regularly meet with officials and legislators about ways to bolster the bankrupt Medicaid system and to share specifics about astute, leading providers that are achieving, and sustaining, affordable change.

While the Vails feel good about their progress thus far, they caution that there is still work to be done. "Mainstay has created a lot of positive momentum, but it's important to remember that this is an unnecessary problem that continues to be extremely costly," says Sylvia. Jim concurs, "There's a long way to go, but I'm glad we've started to make an impact—pound by pound and dollar by dollar."