

# Food Truck 101 for Senior Nutrition Programs

A food truck is a large, motorized vehicle or trailer, equipped to cook, prepare, serve, and/or sell food. They can be used to provide an Older Americans Act (OAA) Senior Nutrition Program (SNP) Title III funded meal to isolated seniors, expand meal service offerings, engage with new senior audiences, and support socially distanced senior center events.

The mobility of a food truck gives SNPs the versatility to meet the needs of older adults that are unlikely to attend a senior center or meal site but who could greatly benefit from the meal service. This could include seniors who lack transportation to a meal site, those who have caregiving responsibilities, younger seniors who have no interest in attending, or those who have a language barrier and are not comfortable attending a senior center or meal site.

## How to Launch a Food Truck Operation

### Engage Key Stakeholders

Discuss the plan to use a food truck with your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA), your State Unit on Aging (SUA), the health department, caterers, and any others who need to be involved.

Ensure health code requirements are met before design plans are entered. See the [FDA's State Retail and Food Service Codes and Regulations by State](#).

If the SNP is a catered program, SNP staff are encouraged to discuss the plan to serve seniors via food truck with the caterer. SNP staff need to collaborate with the caterer to discuss the plans for the provision of meals from a food truck, and once the agreed-upon plan is developed, collaborate with the caterer to negotiate a price. If the SNP operates a central kitchen, they are encouraged to involve meal production staff in the plan to provide this new service. The goal is to keep the food truck meal cost on par with congregate nutrition program meal costs so that the food truck meals can be sustained within the SNP's Title III allocation.

The food truck concept works best if the SNP operates a central kitchen or the SNP is within close proximity to the caterer's kitchen. Having the food truck located at or

close to the site of food production makes it easier for some of the food production to be done in the kitchen and then loaded onto the truck, leaving the remainder of the food production to be done directly on the food truck.

## Select an Appropriate Vehicle

The obvious choice is a truck, but there are other options for this type of operation, such as a trailer or modified bus. The SNP will need to weigh the pros and cons of operating a mobile food retail operation using a food trailer or truck. If a trailer is chosen, then the SNP will need a vehicle to tow it and a capable driver. The SNP will also have to budget for maintenance, repairs, fuel, registration, and insurance for all vehicles. This may cost more for a food truck than a trailer. However, it is easier to maneuver a food truck, as opposed to a trailer, into tight spaces.

You may have access to municipal vehicles that can be obtained for free or at a low cost. A typical community shuttle bus or a small school bus makes a great food truck and can be retrofitted for \$25,000–\$50,000 depending on how it is equipped. A retrofit can take 1–3 months to complete, depending on the time of year. The SNP will need to research a reputable company to conduct the retrofit. Other food truck owners are often a great resource for information. The purchase or lease of a vehicle is generally categorized in a budget under “facility and equipment.” Local, state, and/or county policies and procedures will apply when considering the purchase of a food truck; always check to see if a request for approval in advance of purchase is required.

## Secure Appropriate Vehicle Registration and Staffing

In addition to regular Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) registration requirements and vehicle insurance for the truck itself, you will need a food service license, and the food truck manager will need to be certified. If your SNP is under multiple health departments and plans to use the food trucks within different districts, then you will need a license for each district.

Operating a food truck provides a good opportunity for SNPs to have a job training program with the Title V Senior Employment program, area colleges or technical high schools, and the Department of Labor. These partnerships provide free or low-cost labor to your SNP while providing job skills to the trainee that may lead to unsubsidized, permanent employment. When operating the food truck for senior meal services, at least two people should be working on the truck: one person to

handle food preparation and the other person to serve the participants. Large-scale events will require up to three workers to handle the higher volume, faster-paced environment.

## Consider One-time and Ongoing Expenses

In addition to the vehicle itself, you will need to budget for maintenance, repairs, fuel, registration, and insurance for all vehicles. Additionally, budget for the cost of propane to operate the stove, steam tables, and hot water tanks; hand-wash sinks; a food prep sink; and an electronic smart device register system; and small wares, such as serving utensils, hotel pans, stock pots, and cleaning supplies. After the food truck is fully equipped, one of the biggest expenses is having the vehicle wrapped – covering the vehicle with a vinyl wrap displaying logos and other information to ensure visibility and brand recognition.

Don't forget to find ways to offset or manage some expenses. Accepting donations is one way to help with costs. To comply with OAA donation requirements, a locked box should be affixed to the outside of the truck to allow seniors to drop their confidential contributions.

## Develop a Business Plan

If you are using the food truck to raise money privately, you need to start by developing a business plan. SNPs that need help creating such plans can contact their local [SCORE](#) chapter for free assistance. See also the following resources:

- [Building the Business Capacity of Senior Nutrition Program 2016-2017](#)
- [Business Acumen Basics for Senior Nutrition Programs](#)
- [Business 101: Tips to Ensure Your Program Runs Smoothly and Efficiently](#)
- [Marketing: Re-Thinking Your Understanding and Re-Assessing Your Strategy](#)

## Anticipate Data Management Needs

Using the food truck requires a Point-of-Sale (PoS) system containing an application designed to track attendance and produce required funder reports. Such POS applications are currently in use at over 50 SNP restaurant partnerships across the country. For more details, please refer to the [No Reservations Required Restaurant Partnerships issue brief](#).

## Plan on Engaging New Participants

Food trucks allow SNPs to engage new audiences and identify new participants.

Senior housing locations are ideal for food truck implementation, especially in areas that lack transportation. Offering meals to senior housing residents allows you to focus on low-income older adults congregating in one location.

Community fairs, festivals, outdoor concerts, and other community events are also opportunities for SNPs who own or partner with a food truck to increase their visibility and expand their reach.

In addition to engaging at physical locations, try advertising in community papers or on bulletin boards at local grocery stores, and promote your program and food truck online via a website, social media, or newsletter.