

# Senior Nutrition Meals in Motion: Meeting Meal Needs and Beyond

## Introduction

The need to provide affordable, accessible, and nutritious meals to older adults has always been a priority. Ongoing challenges include serving an increasing number of seniors, engaging and retaining these new customers, and providing services that adhere to social distancing guidelines. Evolving senior nutrition programs (SNPs) should strive to meet the emerging needs of older adults by serving this population, which has varied needs and preferences, in innovative ways.

## Evolving Business Challenges for SNPs

### Older adult population growth

Aging populations will be increasing significantly:<sup>i</sup>

- In 2019, people 65 years and older accounted for **16.5%** of the U.S. population.
- By 2050, that number is expected to rise to **22%**.

### Meeting the need

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found the following:<sup>ii</sup>

- Only 10% of an estimated 16.6 million low-income older adults received meals provided by the Older Americans Act.
- An estimated 24% of low-income older adults were food insecure.
- About 83% of low-income older adults did not receive any meal services.

### Transportation

A lack of reliable transportation or being unable to drive are both real barriers for seniors who would like to go to a meal site to access services. A 2018 national survey found the following:<sup>iii</sup>

- 1 in 5 Americans 65 or older are not driving.
- Those living in rural areas or small towns have few choices for reliable transportation.
- Only 15% of those who live in areas with public transportation use it.
- Most older adults rely on family and friends for transportation.

## Emergencies

Emergencies can result in an unprecedented increase in the number of older adults who would benefit from SNP services. Emergencies, however, can also force closures of senior centers and community sites, making it more difficult for SNPs to provide meal services in congregate settings. This can leave many seniors without meal services, with limited services, in need of a transition to home delivery, and potentially result in growing waiting lists for home-delivered meal services.

Emergency situations add to the existing food insecurity issues that many older adults experience. An estimated 5.5 million seniors age 60 and older are food insecure.<sup>iv</sup> Many seniors regularly face challenges accessing food due to mobility and transportation limitations, and if health restrictions or power outages are in place, these challenges are likely to be heightened.

During an emergency, the food truck is an ideal model for SNPs to pivot and mobilize to meet the needs of the older adult population wherever meals are needed. The flexibility of a food truck operation enables SNPs to confront sudden emergencies. An article published by the US Census Bureau on September 2, 2020, reported that when businesses were ordered closed and social distancing requirements went into effect amid the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants were among the hardest hit. But not all food service businesses were affected equally.<sup>v</sup>

During COVID-19, many food trucks continued to operate and thrive, with the public relying on them when many other food establishments were closed. Food trucks had the advantage of offering grab-and-go and outdoor dining. An SNP-operated food truck could provide the program flexibility during public health emergencies to ensure meals are provided to older adults who are isolated due to stay-at-home restrictions and the closing of senior centers and other congregate nutrition sites. SNPs could also use food trucks during other emergencies such as a power outage at senior housing or displacement due to fire or flood.

See [FAQ Managing SNPs During Emergencies](#).

## Meal variety

Balancing meal preferences between the “younger old” and the “older old” is a challenge for SNPs, as is providing more culturally authentic meals to a more diverse older adult population. Many SNPs have made strides in meeting these needs by expanding participant choice, including lighter fare options, offering mealtime options such as breakfast, dinner, or salad bars, and expanding menus to offer more culturally appropriate meals.

## Funding

Although Older Americans Act Title III C SNPs receive federal funding, these funds are not meant to reach every older adult in the community. The SNP targets adults age 60 and older who are in greatest social and economic need, with particular attention to older adults who are low income, members of minority groups, live in rural communities, have limited English proficiency, and those at risk of institutional care.

SNPs have seen increased demand for their services, so a prudent administrator should consider incorporating tools and partnerships to meet the growing demand. Prioritizing systems can help with ensuring the program is meeting those who are in the greatest need. See [Senior Nutrition Program Guide to Prioritizing Clients](#).

Building relationships with other community-based organizations can help fund SNP initiatives. When working with stakeholders, it is important to provide measurable outcomes for them to see how the funding is making a difference. See [Business Acumen Basics for SNPs](#).

## SNP Meal Opportunities with Food Trucks

A food truck is defined as a large, motorized vehicle or trailer, equipped to cook, prepare, serve, and/or sell food.<sup>vi</sup> This concept can be used to provide an OAA SNP Title III funded meal to isolated seniors, to form new strategic partnerships, engage with new senior audiences, and/or support socially distanced senior center events.

The food truck industry, in various forms, dates back centuries. In recent years, the food truck industry has grown by an estimated 20%, making it a food retail revolution that appears to be, here to stay.<sup>vii</sup> Currently, the food truck industry is outgrowing the restaurant industry, 5.5% to 4.3%.<sup>viii</sup> Many Americans, including seniors, have grown accustomed to seeing food trucks in their community.

Clearly, offering a meal via a food truck is a viable concept. A 2018 report from Mobile Food Trends and Off the Grid found that 34% of food truck owners surveyed said that owning a food truck business gives them the opportunity to experiment and test out new menu items and interesting concepts.<sup>ix</sup>

Although a food truck is not a common business practice for SNPs, as in the business world, it has the potential to allow SNPs flexibility and experimentation with new menus and interesting concepts that could expand meal services to an underserved older adult population. A food truck provides an opportunity for an SNP caterer or central kitchen to highlight their culinary abilities while implementing contemporary or ethnic food options, entrée choices, and nontraditional mealtimes and types that could include breakfast, lunch, and dinner meals. These culinary skills

can be extended to area senior centers, scheduling a special party, an outdoor event on the center's premises, or a picnic in a park requesting a food truck appearance to add to the fun and excitement.

In addition to expanding nutrition services to ensure more people are served, a food truck can enable SNPs to experiment with providing choice, lighter fare, and culturally authentic meals. The mobility of the food truck gives SNPs the versatility to meet the meal needs of those older adult populations 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.

SNPs can also utilize food trucks to target seniors who do not have access to senior centers or congregate meal sites, such as residents of dedicated senior housing buildings. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 40% of public housing units are occupied by a head-of-household person who is 65 or older. Most of these households (88%) are individuals living alone. Over half of the elderly households live in public housing specifically for older adults. Chronic illnesses, along with poor health status and functional limitations, are more prevalent among lower-income elderly. They are older, twice as likely to experience conditions and limitations that threaten their ability to live independently, and three times more likely to live alone. A concentrated effort to serve the older adult population living in subsidized housing with limited access to transportation and limited healthy food options is achievable using a food truck. Serving meals using a truck provides SNPs flexibility, enabling meal services at several locations per day while targeting meals to meet the specific dietary needs or preferences of each population.

Community fairs, festivals, outdoor concerts, and community events provide opportunities for SNPs who own or partner with a food truck to engage with their communities and fundraise, all while bringing visibility to their cause. SNPs with food trucks can serve current clients, expand services to new clientele, raise funds, and raise their community's awareness of their service.

## SNP Food Truck Social Enterprise Opportunity

Social enterprises are typically nonprofit organizations that operate businesses to generate revenue and fulfill their missions.<sup>x</sup> The food truck industry has experienced an overall revenue increase, so why not use a food truck as a mechanism for raising funds privately while bringing awareness to senior nutrition programs?

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## SNP Social Enterprise Example

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The REAL Grille food truck is a social enterprise business of REAL Services located in South Bend, Indiana. The food truck has been in operation for just over two years.

Traveling around the South Bend area, the truck operates March through November, serving the general public. All REAL Grille profits go directly to fund the REAL Services' Meals on Wheels Program. REAL Grille customers (not senior participants) know their purchase benefits the SNP and they are eager to support the cause. Most food items cost about \$10 each. REAL Grille also provides dinner meals to congregate meal sites for special occasions. REAL Services also offers catering through their "Simply Catering to You" business. This concept provides robust catering options for large groups and gatherings. All profits fund the Meals on Wheels program. *Learn more about [The REAL Grille](#).*

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## Key Steps to Launching a Food Truck Operation

**Engage key stakeholders.** SNPs are encouraged to discuss the plan to use a food truck to provide meals to seniors with their local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) and/or their State Unit on Aging (SUA), depending on the state. They should also include the health department to ensure health code requirements are met before design plans are entered. See [State Retail and Food Service Codes and Regulations by States](#).

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 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.

The SNP will need to secure a vehicle for the food truck. Some SNPs 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 make great food trucks 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, an SNP will need a food service license, and the food truck manager will need to be certified. If the SNP is under multiple health departments and plans to use the food trucks within different districts, then the SNP will need to get a license for each district. Sometimes the health department will waive or reduce the fee for nonprofits. Every state has different requirements, so SNPs considering a food truck are urged to check their local requirements and fees.

**Consider ongoing expenses and equipment needs.** SNPs will need to budget for the cost of propane to operate the stove, steam tables, and hot water tanks. Hand-wash sinks, and a food prep sink may need to be included. In addition, an electronic smart device register system will need to be purchased to track senior attendance as well as program business. Other costs include small wares such as serving utensils, hotel pans, stock pots, and cleaning supplies. After the food truck is fully equipped, one of the biggest additional expenses is having the vehicle wrapped, (wrapping is covering the vehicle with a vinyl wrap displaying logos and other information) to ensure visibility and brand recognition. Vehicle wrapping expenses could range from \$4,000–\$8,000. Some vehicle wrapping companies are willing to give discounts to non-profits. A catchy name is recommended – one that does not identify with a particular food, to ensure versatility and flexibility.

**Anticipate data management needs.** Using the Food Truck for Title III C senior meal services requires a Point-of-Sale (POS) system containing an application designed to track attendance and produce required funder reports, that also integrates with

SNP's meal software. 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](#) for details.

## Additional Considerations

**Labor:** Operating a food truck provides a good opportunity for SNPs to have a mutually beneficial job training program with the Title V Senior Employment program, area colleges and technical high schools, and the Department of Labor. These partnerships provide free or low-cost labor to the 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 and engage with the participants. Large scale events will require up to three workers to handle the higher volume, faster paced environment, and the exchange of payment for meals purchased. In addition, private larger-scale events may need a "runner" to replenish food items as they run out, as well as gas for the generator.

See [Tips for Recruiting and Working with Volunteers](#).

**Engaging new audiences:** Senior housing locations are ideal for food truck implementation, especially in areas that lack transportation. Offering meals to senior housing residents allows the SNP to focus on low-income older adults congregating in one location. SNPs are encouraged to meet with building management to get permission to locate the food truck at the housing building to provide meals to the residents. SNPs should determine if there is ample room close to the building for easy access to the food truck. Once the SNP has established locations, it should advertise the availability of the food truck program among the residents and schedule an information and registration session. Residents interested in participating must complete the state intake form for Title III services, after which they will receive a QR-coded card that enables the SNP to track attendance by location.

For food trucks providing meals at ethnically diverse senior housing complexes, the menu should be designed to offer plenty of choices, including ethnically authentic items. Program participants can also be invited to submit menu suggestions with recipes that the registered dietitian can adjust to meet the OAA Senior Nutrition Program dietary guideline requirements. In the summer, both hot and cold menu options can be offered. See [Dietary Guideline for Americans and Older Adults: Toolkit for SNPs](#) for menu guidance.

**Participant contributions:** 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 donations.

**Meal Count Logistics:** Policy and procedure should also cover the circumstances under which meals are reported as [congregate vs. home delivered](#). Congregate meals are meals provided in a congregate or group setting and eaten with another person (in-person or virtually). Meals can be consumed on site with others or delivered, picked up, carried out, or served by drive-through and consumed at home **while** congregating virtually with others. Home-delivered meals are provided via home delivery, pick-up, carry-out, or drive-through **without** congregating. Local policies will need to consider state policies, rules, and regulations.

As mentioned earlier, a scan card issued to a registered SNP participant is the best way to identify eligible participants in a timely fashion. Policies and procedures will need to be developed to address issues such as a registered participant forgetting/losing their scan card (consider the phone number as alternate sign-in), a non-registered eligible person wanting a meal (can you register them on-site?), a person 60 and older who does not want to fill out the registration form but wants the meal, etc.

**Maintaining socialization:** At senior housing locations, participants can be encouraged to bring their meals to the community room with their friends and eat lunch together. Some seniors will bring their meals to their homes and dine with friends. It may happen that a spouse is homebound, and the other spouse will come to the food truck to obtain meals to bring home where they will eat together. On nice days, management can consider placing picnic tables outside for residents to eat on, if safe to do so. Providers can plan tailgating events outside, to include a meal and socialization. Telephone outreach programs can be implemented to engage older adults at home. Events and activities suitable for indoor or outdoor locations (i.e., guest speakers, concerts, etc.) can be scheduled to coincide with the food truck. See [Health, Well-being, and/or Social Connections in a Remote Environment](#).

**Launching a social enterprise venture:** If SNPs are considering leveraging the food truck to raise money privately, they need to start by developing a business plan. SNPs that need help creating such plans can contact their local [Senior Corps of Retired Executives \(SCORE\)](#) chapter for free assistance. See 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](#)

For SNPs that operate a central kitchen or those that use caterers, both can engage culinary experts to choose quick, easy, and popular menus that offer a reasonable but competitive price. Providing food at a public event, especially one that has other food trucks, is very different than providing meals to seniors. SNPs should check what other vendors will be offering and strive to provide different options to avoid directly competing for business with others.

**Anticipated barriers:** In some states, it is difficult to operate a food truck year-round due to weather conditions. In states that experience cold winters, SNPs can limit operations to months with milder weather. If the food truck is garaged, an SNP may be able to extend the season.

It can be difficult to determine the number of meals needed; in some cases, seniors get excited when they see the truck and decide to participate in numbers greater than anticipated. Alternatively, bad weather can result in fewer people participating than hoped. Sometimes, participation is lower than expected due to an unforeseen problem, e.g., a broken elevator in the nearby senior residence that makes it difficult for residents to get out to the truck. The SNP should prepare for more than expected, while also being able to pivot if attendance is unexpectedly low. Transitioning to another senior building is an option; the SNP should inform management that the food truck will be arriving and ask them to notify the residents. Another option is to sell the meals to the public or to the SNP's agency employees.

## Conclusion

An increased need for inventive solutions to reach the aging population can have its challenges. Food trucks can be a competitive, contemporary, and flexible alternative to a traditional food operation with long-established SNP sites. By establishing a food truck operation, SNPs can expand their meal service offerings and engage varied, new clientele while being mindful of current operational constraints, and positioning the organization to meet current and future business challenges.

## General Sources

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<sup>i</sup> [Share of old age population \(65 years and older\) in the total U.S. population from 1950 to 2050. Statista.](#)

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. [Older Americans Act: Updated Information on Unmet Need for Services. Letter to The Honorable Bernard Sanders.](#) GAO-15-601R, June 10, 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> KRC Research National Poll: [Inability to Drive, Lack of Transportation Options are Major Concerns for Older Adults, 2018.](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [The Impact of the Coronavirus on Food Insecurity.](#) (2020). Feeding America.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2020. [Fast-Growing Food Truck Industry Can Operate Amid COVID-19 Social Distancing Rules, No Indoor Seating Orders.](#)

<sup>vi</sup> Merriam Webster, 2020. [Food truck definition.](#)

<sup>vii</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2020. [Food Truck Nation Report.](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [Trends Shaping the Food Truck Industry Outlook in 2022](#) (January 13, 2022).

<sup>ix</sup> Off The Grid, 2018. [Think Mobile, Act Local: The Future of Mobile Food in America.](#)

<sup>x</sup> [Social Enterprise Overview.](#) Community-Wealth.org

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