



TRANSPORTATION STRATEGIES TO CONNECT YOUTH WITH SUMMER FOOD PROGRAMS



MOBILITY MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE SERIES

Each year, millions of children receive free or reduced-cost meals at their school during the academic year. In the summer, meals to these same children are provided through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)'s [Summer Food Service Program](#) (SFSP). However, according to [Feeding America](#), a nonprofit network of 200 food banks, only about 2.75 million (or 12.5%) of the total 22 million eligible children participate in the summer program. One of the main reasons for this low level of participation is a lack of transportation.

Transportation barriers include the following:

- 1) Children lack transportation to get to the summer meal sites. In many communities, school buses cannot provide access during the summer months, forcing families to provide the transportation themselves or find alternative options.
- 2) Neighborhood schools close in the summer, meaning the nearest meal site may be out of reach for children without access to reliable transportation.
- 3) Families may be unaware of the location of summer meal sites, which may differ from sites they accessed during the academic year.
- 4) Agencies in rural areas may have difficulties arranging regular delivery of food to their meal sites, a difficulty that persists in the summers.

This brief explores potential collaboration strategies mobility managers, transportation providers, and summer meal sites can pursue to reduce the number of children who go hungry each summer. It begins with an overview of the USDA's Summer Food Service Program, and then describes innovative partnerships between transportation providers and SFSP program sponsors that transport children or meals to sites. The brief concludes with suggested strategies that mobility management professionals can use to support access to SFSP programs within their communities. A listing of resources is also included.



Photo courtesy of USDA Food and Nutrition Service

STRUCTURE OF THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

Administered at the national level by the USDA, through its Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), the SFSP ensures that eligible children continue to receive nutritious meals when school is not in session. SFSP is federally funded, but administered at the state level, usually through the state education agency, although the state can designate other agencies to act in this capacity.

Through the State Agency, the USDA contracts with sponsors throughout the state to manage the program and work directly with distribution sites to provide the meals. Sponsors — including school districts, local government agencies, camps, faith-based organizations, and other nonprofits — apply to participate and are approved by the State Agency. Some sponsors manage multiple sites, but most operations are small. Site sponsors are reimbursed for the cost of providing meals.



Photo courtesy of Horizons, Cedar Rapids, IA

Summer meals are delivered at different types of SFSP-approved sites: *Open sites* operate in low-income areas where 50 percent or more of the children residing in the area are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals. Meals are served free to any child at the open site. *Enrolled sites* provide free meals to children enrolled in an activity program at the site where at least half of them are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. *Camps* receive payments only for the meals served to children who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals. Summer meals are available to all youth under age 18 who meet the requirements of the site; meals and snacks are also available to individuals over age 18 with a cognitive or physical disability who participate in targeted programs. Physical locations for the sites may include schools, parks, community centers, churches, migrant centers, and other community-based premises.

COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIES FOR TRANSPORTATION AND FOOD SERVICE PROGRAMS

The FNS has actively pursued transportation strategies that either assist with the delivery of food to congregate meal sites or with bringing youth themselves to the sites, all with the goal of increasing youths' access to nutritious food over the summer. This brief invites mobility management practitioners to aid the FNS in achieving this goal by applying their skills in coordination, facilitation, and problem solving to SFSP-related transportation challenges. Below are some strategies that have been successfully applied in parts of the country.

TRANSPORTING YOUTH TO SITES

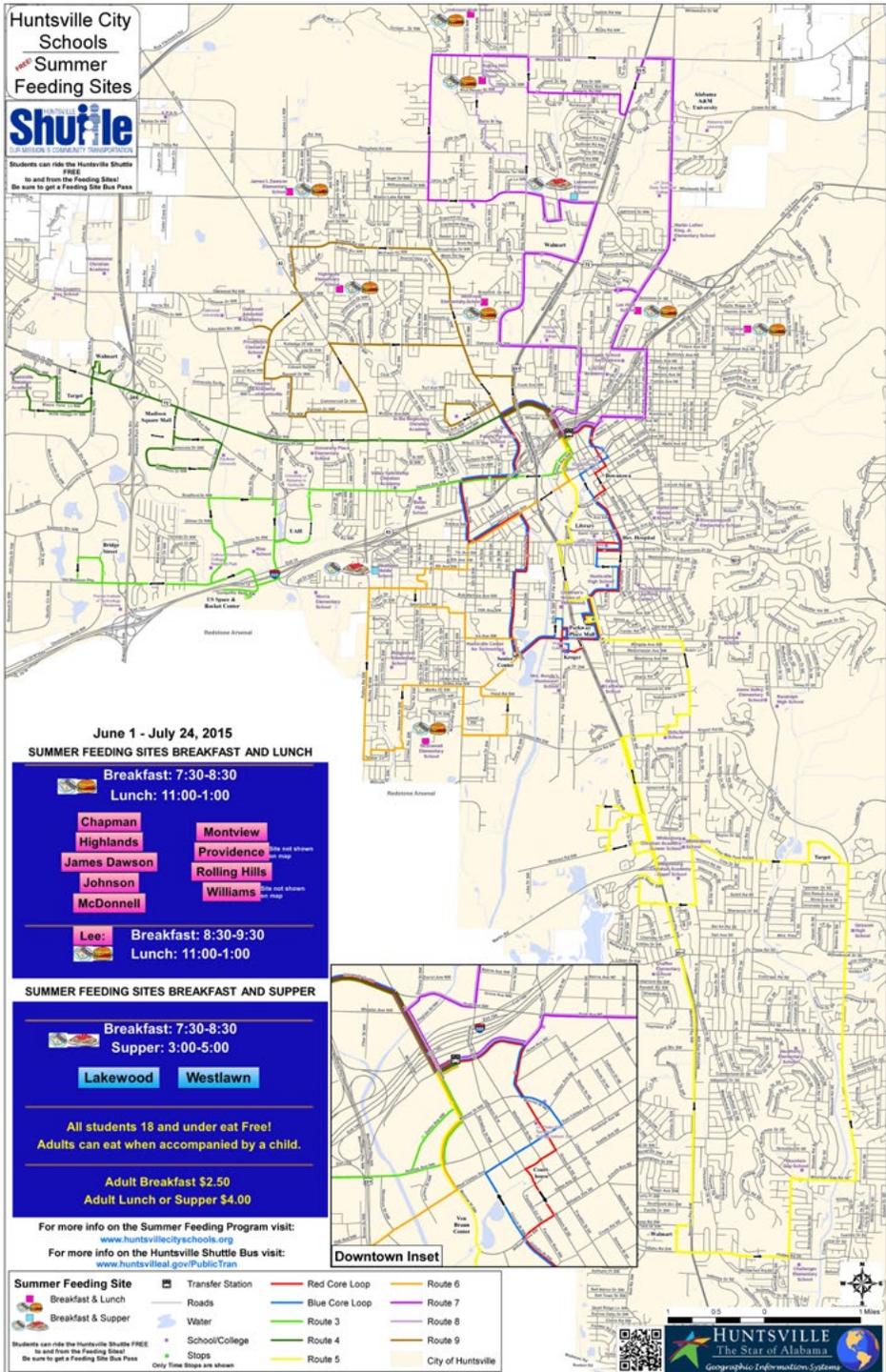
Mobility manager Jennifer Moore coordinates and helps to publicize the free rides youth receive from Effingham County Public Transit (ECPT; Effingham, Illinois) to SFSP sites operated by a local nonprofit, Mission: Summer Fun (MSF). MSF was formed by a group of concerned citizens in 2010 to combat hunger and boredom among youth by providing free meals and motivational, fun activities. MSF contracts with the transit agency to transport youth to meal sites and community programs, at no cost to the youths. In 2014, ECPT provided 172 MSF trips; in 2015 that number grew to 954 after MSF marketed the program among licensed child care providers. Rides are paid for by MSF, which raises funds in the community to cover its costs. In 2014, community donations were generous enough to cover the costs of transporting students for two years.

Parents are required to contact ECPT to discuss their child's need for a ride and to give permission for the child to participate in the program. Because it is a door-to-door service, rides must be arranged in advance, but same-day requests can be accommodated if space is available. Multiple stops are made throughout the community to pick up and transport children to sites. For more information, contact Jennifer Moore at jmoore@cefseoc.org.

The SFSP program in Huntsville, Alabama began in 2013, with most meal sites being located at public schools. In 2014, realizing that many youth could not access the meal sites in the summer, the Huntsville City School District approached the city's Public Transportation Division to see if they could find a solution. The two agencies, with strong support from the mayor, partnered to distribute specially designed bus passes children could use on a fixed-route shuttle service to get to meal sites for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Passes were distributed to youth under age 18 during the final week of school and to youth and their parents at SFSP sites. The transit agency funds the passes out of the city budget; the school district administers the outreach and all other aspects of the meals program.



Photo courtesy of USDA Food and Nutrition Service



Huntsville City Schools, with help from the Public Transportation Division’s GIS staff, also developed a [brochure](#) for families that mapped the food sites and color-coded shuttle routes, and listed the schedules for breakfast, lunch, and dinner at each school. In addition to helping youth get to the food sites, the brochure also became a useful method of educating children about transportation services throughout the community beyond the summer months. For more information, contact transportation director Tommy Brown at tommy.brown@huntsvilleal.gov or 256-427-6800.

Courtesy of Huntsville City Schools

The Region 8 Transit Authority (RTA) in Jackson County, Iowa operates a demand-response service in the rural community of Maquoketa that makes multiple daily trips to the community senior center. In addition to providing senior services, the center functions as an SFSP site. Youth can travel on the RTA bus for \$3.00 each way to get to the center; children under the age of five must be accompanied by an adult, who rides free of charge if over the age of sixty. Families are requested to arrange rides at least 24 hours in advance, but same-day rides are accommodated when possible. For more information, contact Bridget Bartlett at BBartlett@ecia.org.

The Voluntary Action Center (VAC) is a nonprofit agency in DeKalb, Illinois that also serves as an SFSP sponsor. The Kishwaukee YMCA, a long-time community partner, is one of its meal sites. In 2013 and 2014, VAC provided bus passes to the YMCA and other community agencies to distribute to area families to help increase attendance at summer meal sites. However, this effort was only minimally successful, as parents seemed reluctant to let their children ride alone. Also, in some instances, the trips were very long (up to 30 minutes). VAC then switched strategies to instead bring the meals to the children, and in 2015, collaborated with the YMCA and a local hospital to implement the new strategy. VAC provided the lunches, which were transported by the YMCA via the hospital RV to the meal sites. After lunch, the YMCA hosted educational games and CATCH activities, an evidence-based program that teaches children to be healthy for a lifetime. Through this partnership, 850 meals were provided to children in 2015. The successful program will be repeated in 2016. For more information, contact Leah Jordal at ljordal@cavdk.com.

TRANSPORTING MEALS TO SFSP SITES

Nearly 13,000 kids in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and the surrounding Linn County qualify for the summer meals program. Since 2011, [Horizons](#), a human service organization that operates the Meals on Wheels service in Cedar Rapids, partnered with the USDA, the Cedar Rapids Department of Parks and Recreation, and various neighborhood associations to ensure that many of these children had access to summer meals.

In 2014, the Neighborhood Transportation Service (NTS), an agency that augments local bus services with a shared ride van service, partnered with Horizons to deliver 23,900 meals to 15 meal sites. The meals were prepared in Horizons' central kitchen and loaded onto NTS vans traveling along three routes serving the various sites. NTS hired temporary drivers to help meet with the additional demand, with staff serving as back-up drivers when needed. One driver has since become a permanent driver for NTS. In 2015, Horizons provided 18,000 meals at the 15 sites. The drivers, along with other volunteers, distribute the meals and stay on-site while the kids enjoy lunch.

Many of the sites provide opportunities for the children to interact with others through games and activities after lunch. NTS also made it easier for children to access library books during the summer by hooking a book wagon, provided by the local library, to the back of the NTS van and bringing it to meal sites once every week.



Photo courtesy of Horizons



Photo courtesy of USDA Food and Nutrition Service

Over 245 volunteers participate in the program, including some from the largest employers in the area such as Rockwell Collins and U.S. Cellular. Together, the paid drivers and volunteers contributed 945 hours over the summer of 2014. Kids on Course, a program of the Zach Johnson Foundation, and the local United Way also support the program. Building on the program's success, Horizons is considering using a mobile food truck to deliver fresh produce within the city.

In rural Humboldt County, California, more than 50 percent of all Humboldt County school children qualify for the free or reduced price lunch program during the school year. Since 1999, the Humboldt Transit Authority (HTA) has partnered with Food for People, a Humboldt County food bank located in Eureka, to deliver summer meals for children living in four of the food bank's eight most distant regions.¹ Some of the youth live 50 or more miles from the site.

HTA transports meals in coolers to destinations along its normal bus routes, where SFSP site supervisors pick them up. Each summer, HTA donates 160 miles a day, for a total of nearly 9,000 miles. The food bank has also partnered with UPS to transport meals and coolers to other communities; UPS donates over 12,000 miles each summer. Both partnerships allow the food bank to concentrate on deliveries to sites closer to Eureka and save significant costs in daily driving. For more information, contact Karen Wilson, HTA Operations Manager, at 707-443-0826.

¹[USDA: Addressing the Transportation Challenge!](#) Webinar held April 3, 2013, pp 47-54.



Photo courtesy of Murfreesboro City Schools

USING FULLY DEPRECIATED VEHICLES AS MOBILE FEEDING SITES

Since 2013, Murfreesboro, Tennessee's summer meals program has used a refurbished school bus to deliver hot meals to area children. Although a congregant summer food program has been in place for 13 years, the "CHOW" bus is a new way to reach children who may not live within walking distance of a meal distribution site.

The bus, which is fully depreciated and had been taken out of regular service, travels to neighborhood schools, community centers, and apartment complexes where the children board the bus and eat together. Staff members are on board to serve meals and are able to call for more food to be delivered if necessary. During the summer of 2015, the CHOW bus provided 90,000 meals for children in this community just outside of Nashville. Another refurbished vehicle, the Farm 2 School Bus, sold fresh produce in underserved rural areas and used the proceeds to support the cost of providing meals. Learn about similar programs operating in other states from this [USDA brief](#).

STRATEGIES MOBILITY MANAGEMENT PRACTITIONERS CAN IMPLEMENT

USING FTA FUNDING FOR SERVICES TO SFSP PARTICIPANTS

Through its [Rides to Wellness](#) initiative, the Federal Transit Administration encourages its grantees to partner with community stakeholders to promote the well being of community members. Good health outcomes are achieved not only through providing rides to doctors and other health care destinations, but also by connecting people to the nutrition and services they need to stay healthy on a daily basis.

FTA has already provided one avenue for using federal transit funding to improve people's access to good food through its Section 5310 program, as described below:

Transit service providers receiving assistance under this section may coordinate and assist in providing meal delivery services for homebound people on a regular basis if the meal delivery services do not conflict with the provision of transit services or result in a reduction of service to transit passengers. The number and size of vehicles applied for under Section 5310 must be determined only by the number of passengers to be transported, not meal delivery capacity. Section 5310 funds may not be used to purchase special vehicles to be used solely for meal delivery or to purchase specialized equipment such as racks or heating or refrigeration units related to meal delivery. [FTA Section 5310 Circular](#) (FTA C 9070.1G) , pp. II-8 and VI-4

The FTA also encourages communities to incorporate needs related to access to healthy food, whether it involves delivery of meals to meal sites or transporting individuals to meal sites, into the coordinated planning process. As outlined in the [Final Policy Statement on Vehicle Sharing](#), grantees of Federal Interagency Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) agencies can share the use of their vehicles when each participating program pays its fair share of the costs in “accordance with the benefits received.” For example, these agencies can encourage ridesharing, where participants from multiple CCAM agency programs are transported together; partnering with other community organizations to use their vehicles to transport customers; or contracting to use other agencies’ vehicles when they are idle.

ASSIST IN TRANSPORTING YOUTH TO MEAL SITES

As mobility managers assist their communities in coordinating transportation needs and services, they are encouraged to reach out to SFSP sponsors; contact information can be found through the [Summer Food Rocks](#) site. Once they have identified meal site locations and the projected number of children expected to visit each site, mobility managers can help assess the feasibility of transportation solutions such as reduced or free summer transit passes, route changes, or shuttles to improve accessibility to those sites. They can also request to participate in local SFSP kick-off events, where they can share scheduling and route information from the local transit agency related to routes traveling to sites where summer meals are offered. Mobility managers can distribute schedules and route maps and assist parents in identifying the best option for students and parents to conveniently access the nearest meal site.

DELIVER MEALS TO SITES ALONG TRANSIT ROUTES

Public transit vehicles, particularly in rural areas, traverse hundreds of miles each day, providing transportation services to community members living in diverse areas. Some communities (see above) have chosen to support food services by also delivering meals. This can be done on a volunteer or contract basis. The USDA's [*Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program*](#) provides funding to rural communities for the development of essential community facilities, including capital expenditures for vehicles.

DONATING FULLY DEPRECIATED VEHICLES FOR MOBILE FEEDING SITES

Over the years, refurbished school buses have been reincarnated as mobile meal sites, bookmobiles, petting zoos and grocery stores. Under certain circumstances, transit agencies may consider donating or refurbishing buses that have passed their useful life and that have a resale value of \$5,000 or less² to be used as traveling cafeterias. For example, in Minnesota, the Wilder Foundation purchased an out-of-circulation bus at auction and refurbished it as a rolling grocery store that sells nutritious food at below-market prices in 19 locations throughout the Twin Cities area. In operation since 2014, the Twin Cities Mobile Market program has proven to be so successful that the foundation recently obtained a second vehicle.

²[*FTA Circular 5010D; Grant Management Requirements*](#), October 1, 2008, Chapter IV, subsection 3, discusses disposition of equipment that has reached the end of its service life. Because there is no Federal interest in any unit of grant assisted property with a FMV of \$5,000 or less, the grantee may do what it wishes with that property, including removing parts as it sees fit.

USE TRANSPORTATION EXPERTISE TO ASSIST SFSP SPONSORS

Even if they are not able to assist in transporting youth or meals, mobility managers and transportation planners can apply their skills in assisting SFSP participants. For example, they could

- Assist with creating maps of meal food sites using GIS tools, as they did in the example of Huntsville, Alabama (see above)
- Help plan routes for any dedicated food delivery or youth transportation service provided through other agencies
- Coordinate vehicle maintenance or driver training with SFSP sponsors
- Identify business leaders who can support transportation strategies by contributing to the cost of bus passes, financing a shuttle that brings youth to SFSP sites, or covering the cost of refurbishing a vehicle
- Partner with local food banks and other community organizations to design and disseminate information about local meal sites their routes routinely serve
- Distribute flyers on SFSP sites on bus routes
- Encourage transportation agency employees to volunteer with SFSP programs

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The USDA has a longstanding partnership with the FTA to solve transportation issues related to the SFSP. Learn more about these efforts through the following resources:

- [*Department of Transportation Partnerships*](#)
- [*Summer Food Service Program: Transportation*](#)
- [*Summer Meals and Transportation Challenges*](#)

To find an SFSP site in your community, use the tool at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks>



Photo courtesy of USDA Food and Nutrition Service

The National Center for Mobility Management (NCMM; www.nc4mm.org) is a national technical assistance center created to facilitate the adoption of mobility management strategies. The NCMM is funded through a cooperative agreement with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), and is operated by a consortium of three national organizations—the American Public Transportation Association, the Community Transportation Association of America, and the Easter Seals Transportation Group.

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