

Mission Possible:

How You Can Start
and Operate a Soup Kitchen



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Artwork by Susan Darley

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chapter one

Introduction

Chapter One: Introduction

TASK was started by a small group of dedicated volunteers concerned that there were “people in the city who did not have enough to eat.” Opening day for the soup kitchen was January 13, 1982. Volunteers came on duty at 11 a.m. and at 1 p.m. the doors opened and 60 people were served turkey soup, crackers, a peanut butter sandwich, Jell-O and coffee or a fruit drink.

Today TASK patrons include the elderly, the addicted, the mentally ill, the physically challenged, those recently released from prison, veterans, recent immigrants, families with children, and the working poor. The majority of TASK patrons possess multiple barriers to employment, such as addiction problems and mental illness (some are afflicted with both mental illness and chemical addiction, the so-called MICA population). TASK patrons are a population composed in large part of individuals who need intense social, health, and human care services to re-enter the work force. Chronic hunger and shortages of food at the end of the month are predictable events for many people in Trenton.

The vast majority of TASK patrons are “food-insecure,” to use the current term of choice to describe those who consistently are not able to access enough food to fully meet basic needs at all times due to lack of financial resources. In plain English, those who are food-insecure subsist on barely adequate quantities of food and frequently have to worry about how to get their next meal.

In the last few years TASK has seen more and more of the working poor on their lunch break, wearing their tool belts and paint-splattered overalls, coming to the kitchen to receive a hot meal and save on their food budget. To accommodate the working poor, TASK has developed a card system that allows them to go to the head of the line so they can meet lunch hour time constraints.

Most recently, as a result of the recession, TASK is seeing an increasing number of individuals who are unemployed for the first time in their adult working lives. Included among the newly unemployed are individuals who had volunteered at TASK in better times.

TASK now serves a hot nutritious, multiple-course, sit-down meal three times each day. TASK also

offers a wide range of programs and services including an Adult Education Program that provides training in literacy, math, computer skills and preparation for the GED for some 90 students with 60 volunteer tutors. It also employs a full-time social worker and offers a robust visual and performing arts program; mail service for the homeless, use of phone, fax, and message machines; distribution of donated clothing, books, hygiene articles; health screening and food stamp prescreening and enrollment, among other services.

The vast majority of TASK’s financial donors and over 2,500 volunteers live in the Mercer County suburban communities surrounding Trenton. TASK is widely considered an effective provider of meals and services and has received six consecutive Charity Navigator four-star ratings (highest) for the fiscally responsible way it executes its mission.

Over the years, those who have led TASK have adhered to the principle of doing what they do best, scrupulously avoiding the temptation to take on duties they have no experience performing – that is to say, they have avoided mission drift.

For example, rather than open new branches of TASK in the other wards of Trenton, TASK delivers hot meals at no cost to satellite sites at neighborhood churches where volunteers from local congregations serve their neighbors in need. Similarly, when it is cost-effective, TASK has contracted with other charities to provide services at their sites rather than increase staff to provide those services.

In three decades, TASK has evolved from simply serving meals to become a multi-focused organization with a four-part mission:

- Provide meals to the hungry people of Trenton
- Offer services that encourage self-sufficiency and improve quality of life
- Inform the wider public of the needs of the hungry
- Advocate for resources to meet those needs.

Started with a first-year budget of \$40,000 in 1982, TASK now raises almost \$2,000,000 annually without being overly dependent on government funding (less than 5% of TASK funds come from government). Some 25 foundations, dozens of churches, synagogues and mosques, hundreds of businesses and thousands of individuals annually support TASK.

Feeding the Hungry vs. Ending Poverty

It is important to state that there are those who feel that operating soup kitchens is a Band-Aid approach and actually retards the larger effort of reducing poverty. Some observers, like Janet Poppendieck of Hunter College in her book *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*, argue that soup kitchens that only address hunger are “aiming too low” and this “allows government to shirk its duty to promote the common good.”

The authors are of the mind that it is not a matter of either/or, but rather that both efforts are needed. We cannot let people go hungry while we address the factors that result in high levels of poverty. We feel strongly that government at all levels needs to do more to address the root causes of hunger and poverty.

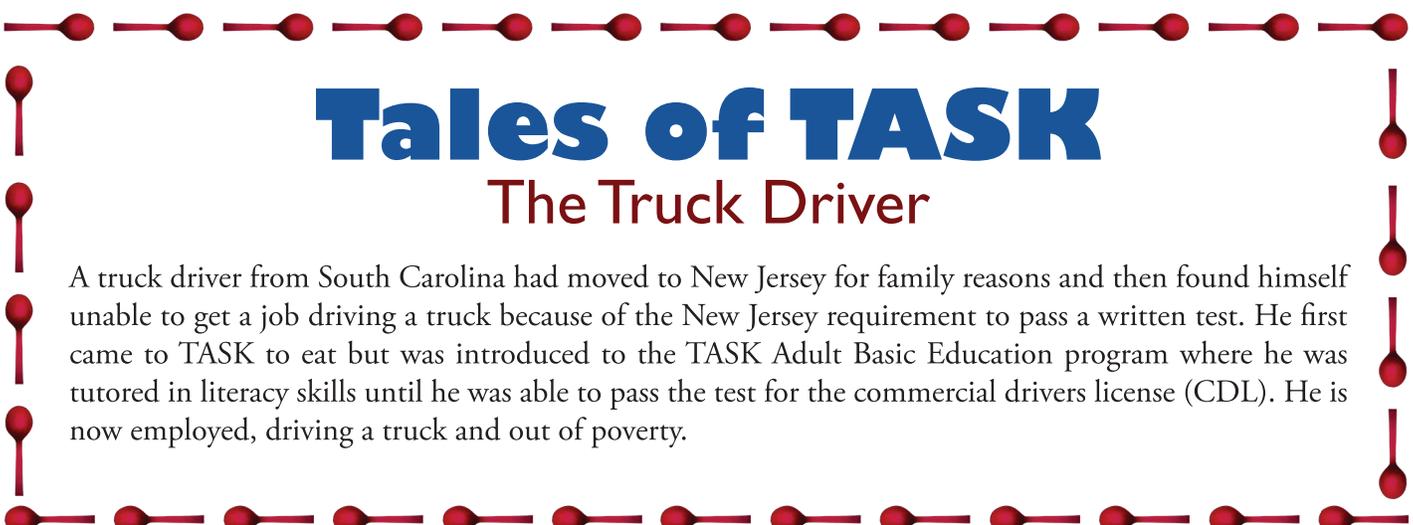
This is the worst of times since the Great Depression for those who are poor or near poor in America. Taken together, these two categories constitute almost a third of all Americans. With rare exception, states, counties and cities are slashing budgets, and the lines at soup kitchens and food pantries are growing longer.

Due to the nation’s high unemployment, the USDA Food Stamp Program (now known as the Supplemental Food Assistance Program – SNAP) has more people enrolled than at any time in its 40-year history (one in seven Americans). Hundreds of thousands of children suffer pangs of hunger as they await their first meal of the day – a free breakfast and/or lunch served at school. More Americans are facing food insecurity for the first time in their lives.

How to Use the Book

This book is meant to provide basic information to individuals and groups who are considering starting or are in the early stages of operating a soup kitchen. Each chapter in this book is composed of two sections: a two to three page overview of the subject followed by a list of tips, which are guides to some of the more subtle operations of a soup kitchen.

We have attempted to organize this book in a chronological fashion. The book will take you from your very first conceptual considerations to relatively detailed instructions on the most common challenges you will face. In all cases, our essential goal has been to be practical and helpful.



Tales of TASK

The Truck Driver

A truck driver from South Carolina had moved to New Jersey for family reasons and then found himself unable to get a job driving a truck because of the New Jersey requirement to pass a written test. He first came to TASK to eat but was introduced to the TASK Adult Basic Education program where he was tutored in literacy skills until he was able to pass the test for the commercial drivers license (CDL). He is now employed, driving a truck and out of poverty.



chapter two

Getting Started

Chapter 2: Getting Started

This chapter is primarily directed towards soup kitchen start-up projects, but much of the information and guidance is also applicable to existing soup kitchens or food pantries looking to expand their services.

There are some clearly defined initial actions:

- Ascertain the services provided by other agencies and nonprofits
- Evaluate your resources – food, facility, funding, and volunteers
- Determine whether your service is religiously based
- Define the scope of your mission
- Determine whether you should incorporate as a nonprofit
- Develop fundamental food service policies

Determination of Services Provided by Other Agencies

You should contact social service agencies, food pantries, the local food bank, religious leaders and government officials to determine the extent to which the hunger problem is being addressed and where there may be gaps in service. You do not want to duplicate what is already being provided.

It is strongly suggested that you and your group visit soup kitchens outside your area, if available, to help you become familiar with the resources needed, and the common practices and challenges you will face.

Realistic Analysis of Start-up Resources

Consider and think about your sources of food. These include Feeding America food banks, organizations that distribute federal commodities, local supermarkets and restaurants, community gardens, gleaning projects, food drives from religious institutions, schools, and businesses. What can be donated and what food will have to be purchased?

Will there be a cost for the facility in which the meal is prepared and served? Do you need to buy food preparation equipment, kitchen and dining room supplies, a refrigerator or a freezer?

Do you want to solicit funds and/or food from government sources? One downside to becoming dependent on government funds is the possibility of funding cuts if there is a down-turn in the economy (which may be the very time when you are seeing the greatest need for your services). This is the reason there is a real advantage to having a diversified funding base (see Chapter 9).

How many volunteers will you need? Will there be paid staff? What are the particulars of your facility? Is your project an outgrowth of a group with a cadre of volunteers? Chapter 11 will provide further details on volunteer recruitment and management, but the main consideration at this point is how many volunteers you need to prepare and serve the meal and do clean-up afterwards.

You should also consider any specific skills needed such as cooking, legal assistance and experience in dealing with low-income populations. Similarly, does anyone in your group have food safety training and certification? Does anyone have a nutritional and/or dietitian background? Does anyone have an explicit link to the food industry?

A major consideration is the facility for preparing and serving your meal. Chapter 3 will provide guidance relative to your kitchen and dining room. But at this point you must determine if you will be housed in an existing building or if you will need to build. Does the facility come free or are rental funds required?

Religious vs. Non-Religious

Will you operate from a religious perspective or provide secular service? If you want to receive government food commodities and/or become a member of the local food bank, meals must be served to all who come to the soup kitchen without regard to religious preference and worshiping cannot be a condition for receiving a meal.

In addition, some patrons may not be comfortable in an overtly religious setting, for example, Hispanic patrons in a Protestant church or African-Americans in a historically white church (or whites in a historically African-American church).

As you begin to form your project, another approach to consider is that of operating as an interfaith organization. By involving many different congregations you will have greater access to both volunteers and funding.

Define the Scope of Your Mission

After determining the unmet emergency food needs in the community and developing an understanding of the resources needed to meet that need, you are now in a position to define your mission or purpose. A crucial decision is whether you will be single purpose, i.e., meal service, or provide multiple services.

Although the development of a mission statement can often be a frustrating and tedious process, it is worth the effort because it can become a sort of automatic pilot that keeps you on course if you consistently refer to it.

Should You Incorporate as a Nonprofit?

Many soup kitchens incorporate as nonprofit agencies. Becoming a nonprofit or a 501(c)(3) organization means the entity, usually a corporation, is organized for a nonprofit purpose and has been recognized by the IRS as being tax-exempt by virtue of its charitable programs. Forming a corporation means that the founders, or incorporators, are creating a legal entity that exists wholly apart from the people involved with it. Most people prefer to form a nonprofit corporation because of the personal liability protection a corporation provides.

An important second reason for becoming a nonprofit under the tax code is to allow donors to deduct their contributions from their taxable income. A third reason is because you want to accept grants and donations and want exemption for yourself from paying federal income tax. Yet another reason is that you must be a 501(c)(3) organization to receive government commodities and join the food bank. Section 501(c)(3) organizations are very restricted in how much political and legislative lobbying activity they may conduct. Appendices A and B provide further details on filing and approval of corporate, nonprofit status and development of bylaws.

Other administrative issues that you will need to consider at the outset are insurance coverage for property and liability, health insurance for any employees and Health Department Certification from your local municipality.

Fundamental Food Service Policies

Agree upon the following:

1. How do you want to refer to those who come to your soup kitchen? Various titles we have heard are dinner guests, clients, consumers, and patrons. TASK uses the title patrons since consumers and clients sound somewhat clinical.
2. What will be your days, times and hours of operation?
3. How many people do you plan to serve initially?
4. Who will do menu planning?
5. Has anyone taken, or will they take, food safety training?
6. Will you be serving on a cafeteria line or providing table service?
7. Do you want to provide immediate service for those who don't have much time (who may be on lunch break from their low-paying job)?
8. Do you want to be able to provide alternate servings (for those who are allergic to certain foods or those who have religious dietary restrictions)?

Getting Started Tips

TIP # 1 – In your mission discussions, you will probably find that your resources constrain what you would ideally wish to do, so it is important to start modestly and be successful, as opposed to being overly ambitious and falling short or running into avoidable problems.

TIP # 2 – One possible source of food for your kitchen is “Plant a Row” projects where home gardeners designate one or more rows for food to be donated to the soup kitchen.

TIP # 3 – Your mission statement should take no longer than 10 to 15 seconds to read or hear. It should hopefully stimulate the response, tell me much more. Your mission should be one that is easily described to all of your constituents – board, staff, volunteers, donors, patrons, and the wider community.