

Reducing Sodium and Added Sugars at a Regional Food Service Management Company

To learn more about how food service management companies (FSMCs) are improving the nutritional quality of food served and sold across a variety of settings, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) interviewed national and regional FSMCs across the United States. ASTHO then developed company snapshots that highlight different approaches food service operators are using to reduce sodium and added sugar in their food offerings. These snapshots can help public health leaders and practitioners learn more about the range of FSMC nutrition initiatives, identify common goals across public health entities and the private sector, and consider opportunities for aligning efforts.

Selrico: A Regional Company Snapshot

[Selrico Services](#) (Selrico) is a regional, family-owned FSMC that serves government organizations, institutional facilities, and commercial companies, and operates in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona. It provides a range of services that include institutional food service, congregate meal service, emergency feeding, temporary food service facilities (e.g., mobile kitchens), permanent and temporary facility development and operation, base-operating support, and contingency and life support.

Partnering with the City of San Antonio

San Antonio was one of only seven cities to receive a sodium reduction grant from CDC. Because the city wanted to reduce sodium in meals served through government programs and other settings, it partnered with Selrico to address sodium levels in prekindergarten and senior feeding programs. The three-year project began in 2013.

One of Selrico's largest city contracts is to serve the [Pre-K 4 San Antonio](#) (SA) program, a full-day Pre-K program that also offers free afterschool care in the city. The program is the result of the mayor's efforts to make high-quality,

government-funded pre-K education accessible to low-income families. Selrico now operates in four education centers serving breakfast, lunch and snack to 1,700 children each day.

For Pre-K 4 SA, Selrico's goal is to provide nutritious, innovative meals that expose kids to healthy food and the opportunity for nutrition education. The company's registered dietitian manages both the menu and food production. Meals are prepared out of Selrico's Commissary Kitchen and are delivered hot and ready to eat.



Selrico is also the contracted meal vendor for the City of San Antonio's Senior Nutrition Program (COSA SNP). Approximately 3,000 lunches are produced at Selrico's Commissary Kitchen and are delivered to 60+ senior centers that offer congregate feeding for eligible senior citizens. Selrico is proud to have operated this program for many years, as they continue to provide nutritious and wholesome hot meals to many senior citizens in the community.

Successes in Reducing Sodium and Added Sugar

Sodium Reduction Efforts

The city has challenged Selrico to meet desired goals. For example, the city selected menus for nutrition analyses and worked with Selrico to set nutrition targets. It also gave suggestions on changing menu items and using new foods and ingredients. The collaboration requires ongoing negotiation between the city and company with the shared goal of providing food to meet specific nutrition targets.

The pre-K and other child programs' nutrition standards are guided by the national [Nutrition Standards for School Meals](#), while the [Dietary Reference Intakes](#) guide the nutrition standards for the COSA SNP, with the goal of 800-1,000 mg of sodium/meal. The company is close to serving meals with an average of 1,200 mg sodium and is continuing to strive for lower-sodium alternatives.

Added Sugar Reduction Efforts

Although there is no specific sugar-reduction program, Selrico uses fresh fruit, canned fruit without syrup, and different kinds of fruits and vegetables in its meals to reduce added sugar while remaining within budget.



Identifying Challenges and Opportunities



Despite all of the progress made, challenges remain. Selrico's Phoenix programs have a Chinese food menu in which sodium tends to be higher. Additionally, the company would like to do scratch cooking at its sites, as well as enhance current employee training opportunities.

Moving to healthier pre-K options wasn't easy. Initially, the program menu included fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy items that weren't familiar to the children (e.g., salmon burgers and kale), but the kids didn't eat the new foods and acceptance was very low. Through ongoing nutrition education with parents and teachers, Selrico has found a better balance between student-accepted foods and nutritious options. For example, familiar/kid-friendly items are offered with new/healthy items (e.g. hamburger on whole wheat bun paired with sweet potato chunks in place of sweet potato fries or French fries. Ultimately, Selrico hopes to move away from using some of these pre-cooked items.

Older adult settings also present challenges and opportunities. Many older adults have established preferences for salty food. However, they have been quick to provide feedback to Selrico, which has helped staff offer healthier options that the clients like. In addition to nutrition education, staff are using more herbs and spices to help elevate flavor and taste. Moving forward, Selrico would like to learn how larger companies develop healthier menus.

Key Takeaways

- **Cities can drive change.** A strong partnership with city of San Antonio departments has helped improve the healthfulness of foods offered.
- **Desire for scratch cooking.** Scratch cooking allows for more control over the ingredients and can help reduce both sodium and added sugar in prepared dishes.
- **Hunger for insights.** Smaller, more regionally-based FSMCs are eager to learn from larger FSMCs, specifically how they purchase, prepare, and offer healthier menu items.
- **Identify lower sodium items.** In order to meet nutrition requirements, FSMCs should continue to work with food suppliers that offer lower sodium alternatives.
- **Engage consumers.** Providing nutrition education is critical to increasing acceptance of new, healthy options.

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