As mobile produce markets become an increasingly popular strategy around the country for addressing food access and food security, operators now have a new tool they can take advantage of whether they're just getting started or looking to expand.

It's an evidence-based roadmap for success developed by researchers at the University at Buffalo, and it is now publicly available for anyone running or looking to start a mobile market or similar food program. The Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation in Massachusetts provided funding for the toolkit rollout.

"We're letting mobile market operators know that they don't need to reinvent the wheel. This toolkit compiles a lot of information and resources from other markets," said Lucia Leone, assistant professor of community health and health behavior in UB's School of Public Health and Health Professions.

Leone, Ph.D., is the primary investigator on the Veggie Van Study, a federally-funded research project based at UB and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The toolkit the team developed is based off the outcomes of the study.

"It's important to use a strategy that's evidence based. While there are lots of programs out there looking to address diet and food access disparities, our mobile market model has been tested by research and shown to have an impact on what people are eating," Leone said.

"Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation is supporting the toolkit because we believe in the power of mobile markets to increase access to fresh, healthy, mostly local food for families and communities. The toolkit is an amazing asset to help get more of these vehicles on the road and into communities," said Michael Devlin, the foundation's director of grants and initiatives.

Leone and her team have partnered with nine organizations across the country to help them begin or expand a mobile market using the Veggie Van model, which features multiple components designed to increase access to healthy, affordable food and help people improve their diets through skill building.

Highlights of the Veggie Van model include:

- Selling a good variety of high-quality fresh fruits and vegetables at a reduced cost
- Setting up markets in areas, such as health clinics and community centers, frequented by lower income families
- Accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and other food incentive programs
- Encouraging customers to purchase a bundle, or box, of produce, rather than just a few items
- Offering cooking demonstrations, recipes and nutrition education to help customers use and understand what they're
The toolkit provides step-by-step instructions for starting and running a mobile produce market following the Veggie Van model. It covers topics ranging from getting set up to creating a business model that is financially sustainable.

"It's kind of that Holy Grail for mobile market operators. It's a template for setting up a market and learning from others' mistakes and successes," said Anne Lally, outreach coordinator for the Veggie Van study.

The toolkit officially launched in March during the second annual Mobile Market Summit convened by UB and held virtually this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the toolkit is more widely available now, it is already being used by some of the study's partner organizations, including the Buffalo-based Massachusetts Avenue Project.

"I really like the online toolkit—I've been using it all the time. I think there are a lot of good resources, and it's been added to since the conference," said Taylor Johnson, MAP's mobile market coordinator.

That's precisely the point, says Lally, noting that the toolkit is a living document.

Flexibility is especially important given the current state of the world, much of which is battling the COVID-19 pandemic. "Mobile markets exist to address food insecurity and go to these so-called food deserts. All of a sudden, we all feel like we're food insecure because everyone's access has changed drastically," Lally said.

"Mobile markets have always been creative in how they're implemented, and in their models, because they have to be. This is a time in which that flexibility and ingenuity is paying off," Lally said.

The toolkit will address how mobile markets are adapting to this new climate, which includes greater focus on home delivery of groceries because people are reluctant to go to grocery stores and other public places where lots of people congregate, Leone said.