

Background

State Law Enforcement Bureau (SLEB) agreements are the mechanisms by which USDA's Food and Consumer Service (FCS) provides States with food stamp coupons to use in conducting investigations of the illegal selling, buying, and redemption of food stamp coupons. FNS created the SLEB agreement mechanism in 1989. By 1994, 32 States had signed agreements.

FNS conducted this study to determine what has been accomplished under the terms of the SLEB agreements, to identify problem areas and the reasons for broad variation among States in their use of the agreements, to describe best practices and ways to improve the SLEB agreement process, and to assess the relevance of SLEB to EBT implementation. The report is based on a telephone survey of all States with SLEB agreements and case studies of 6 States with noteworthy levels of SLEB agreement-generated activity.

Findings

Most of the 32 States with SLEB agreements have recently conducted investigations with the 10 most active States producing substantial results. The most frequent targets of SLEB agreement investigations are food retailers and individuals who buy food stamp coupons (as opposed to individuals looking to sell food stamps).

Problems

Due to flexibility in SLEB agreement language and variation in Regional/Field Office coordination, there is surprising randomness to trafficking investigations. In some States there is little Federal/State assessment of targets submitted for investigation. Some investigations

have been conducted outside the spirit, if not the letter, of the SLEB agreement, including sting operations that do not target food retailers or known traffickers. Federal Food Stamp Program (FSP) and State/local conflict was common over how penalties should be applied (given different jurisdictions and choices as to fines, penalties and actions) to individuals and retailers found to be trafficking. Insufficient FNS reporting requirements hinders the overall accountability of coupons used in SLEB investigations and resulted in few FSP retailers being disqualified as a result of SLEB activity. States have not implemented mechanisms to refer recipients involved in trafficking to the FSP disqualification process for further action.

Best Practices

The most effective States used 12 noteworthy practices, described in the report. These include: using dedicated trafficking units with centralized control of investigations; integrating SLEB investigations with all of the state's welfare fraud investigations; and establishing a strong relationship with state and local prosecutors to coordinate activities.

Continued Relevance

SLEBs hold continued relevance. The transfer of SLEB monitoring activity to FNS Field Offices led to enhanced interagency cooperation and communication in some problem States. Dynamic USDA/OIG & State relationships have developed where resources and coordination between the two permit. Texas and New Mexico are working jointly with the USDA OIG on EBT trafficking investigations which reinforces the continued relevance for SLEB agreements within an EBT environment.

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