

Nutrition Assistance Facts

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) administers the nutrition assistance programs of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For three decades, since its establishment in 1969, FNS has led America's fight against hunger and provided good nutrition through high-integrity programs delivered by State and local partnerships. The mission of the Food and Nutrition Service is to reduce hunger and food insecurity by ensuring better access to food, a healthful diet, and nutrition education for children and needy families.

Each day, one out of every five Americans receives nutrition assistance through one or more of the 15 FNS programs, including food stamps, school meals, and the WIC program. The Food and Nutrition Service works in public and private partnerships with State and local governments and non-profit organizations to deliver program benefits to those who need them. States, counties, cities, and school systems administer distribution of food benefits and determine eligibility for millions of children and families. Thousands of local food pantries, soup kitchens, churches, and social service agencies provide direct nutrition assistance to hungry people with FNS support.

Congress appropriated \$36.5 billion in Fiscal Year 1999 for the Food and Nutrition Service to serve more than 40 million Americans through nutrition assistance programs.

Food Stamp Program: First Line of Defense Against Hunger

The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger for millions of families. The program provides benefits monthly for eligible participants to purchase approved food items at approved food stores. Eligibility and allotments are based on household size, income, assets, and other factors. Over half of all participants are children; one out of six is a low-income older adult.

Food stamps help families buy more food and better food, significantly increasing intake of 12 essential vitamins and minerals by comparison to low-income households that don't participate in the program. Nutrition provided by food stamps is essential to the success of welfare reform, providing a national safety net as families make the transition from welfare to self sufficiency. It also enables States to experiment more boldly with welfare policies, knowing that the Food Stamp Program is there to provide a steady base that serves the basic needs of low-income households.

The welfare reform law of 1996 eliminated food stamp benefits for many legal immigrants, and restricted benefits for many able-bodied adults without dependents. Congress subsequently restored benefits for many children and elderly immigrants, and for some specific groups. Local food stamp offices can provide information about eligibility, and USDA operates a toll-free number (800-221-5689) for people to receive information about the Food Stamp Program.

As the cornerstone of USDA's nutrition assistance programs, the Food Stamp Program receives special attention because of its size and importance. Program integrity is a high priority. USDA carefully screens food retailers who apply to accept food stamps, reviews records regularly, and

quickly removes retailers who violate regulations. State food stamp agencies oversee the authorization of individual stamp recipients and revoke the eligibility of those who break the program's rules. Those who commit very serious program violations can face fines or even criminal prosecution.

By Congressional mandate, States must convert food stamp coupon programs to an electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card system by 2002. Thirty-nine States plus the District of Columbia already use EBT for at least some food stamp benefits. More than half of all food stamp benefits are now distributed by EBT.

EBT customers use a plastic card similar to a bank debit card to buy groceries by transferring funds from a food stamp benefit account to a retailer's account. EBT electronically records every transaction, providing a useful tool to help identify fraud, and saving costs for retailers, banks, and government.

The Food Stamp Program served 18.3 million people in March, 1999. Food stamp participation has dropped steadily from an all-time high of 28 million in March of 1994. Monthly food benefits average about \$72 per person. The Federal government pays for the benefits and shares administrative expenses with the States. Congress appropriated \$21.2 billion for the Food Stamp Program in FY 1999.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC): Healthier Mothers and Babies

WIC's goal is to improve the health of low-income pregnant women, breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding new mothers, and infants and children up to 5 years old. WIC provides supplemental foods, nutrition education, and access to health services. Participants redeem vouchers for specific foods that contain nutrients frequently lacking in the diet of low-income mothers and children. Participation averages about 7.4 million people a month. The average food benefit per person is more than \$32 a month. The FY 1999 appropriation for WIC is \$3.924 billion.

The WIC program is effective in improving the health of mothers and their infants. A study of WIC and Medicaid costs in five States showed that women who participate in WIC during pregnancy have lower Medicaid costs for themselves and their babies in the first weeks after birth than do women who do not participate. In the States studied, Medicaid savings ranged from \$1.77 to \$3.13 for each dollar spent in prenatal WIC benefits.

The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program gives WIC families increased access to fresh produce by providing coupons for fresh fruits and vegetables that can be used at authorized farmers' markets. Congress made \$10 million available for the FMNP under the FY 1999 WIC appropriation, plus another \$5 million dependent on WIC participation.

Child Nutrition Programs: Eating to Learn, Learning to Eat

School meals and child nutrition assistance programs improve the diets of more than 26 million children every school day. But major nutritional challenges remain. One out of every five children is overweight or obese, and many consume fat above recommended levels.

Healthy alternatives like school lunch, school breakfast, and the newly expanded afterschool nutrition programs are vital to better nutrition and health. Congress in 1998 expanded reimbursement to provide snacks for educational and enrichment afterschool care programs for children through age 18. Funding for snacks in afterschool programs is provided through the National School Lunch Program and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.

The National School Lunch Program provides funding and commodity foods to non-profit food services in elementary and secondary schools, and in residential child care facilities. Every school day, more than 26 million children in more than 96,000 schools across the country eat lunch through the National School Lunch Program. More than half of these children qualify to receive their meals free or at a reduced price. School meals must meet the Federal nutritional standards of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Congress appropriated \$5.38 billion for the school lunch program for FY 1999.

The School Breakfast Program serves some 7.1 million children in more than 71,000 schools every school day. As in the school lunch program, low-income children qualify to receive school breakfast free or at a reduced price. Schools are reimbursed for meals served, which must meet nutritional standards similar to the school lunch program. Studies have shown that students who eat breakfast perform better academically, have fewer behavior problems, and are tardy and absent less frequently than those who do not. Congress appropriated \$1.4 billion in FY 1999 for the School Breakfast Program.

The Child and Adult Care Food Program supplies commodity foods and cash reimbursement for meals and snacks in child and adult day care centers, in family and group day care homes for children, and in some homeless shelters that serve young children. This program provides meals to 2.6 million children and 58,000 adults each month. Congress appropriated \$1.61 billion for the CACFP in FY 1999.

The Summer Food Service Program bridges the nutrition gap when school is not in session, providing meals to more than 2 million low-income children during school vacation periods. The USDA reimburses sponsors such as local schools, governmental agencies, non-profit groups and residential camps for meals, which are served free of charge to participants. The FY 1999 Congressional appropriation is \$294 million.

The Special Milk Program furnishes milk to children in approved schools, camps, and child care institutions that have no Federally supported meal program. It distributed 133 million half-pints of milk in 1998. Congress appropriated \$18.1 million for FY 1999.

Other FNS Programs: Strengthening the Nutritional Safety Net

The Emergency Food Assistance Program provides commodity foods to States for distribution to supplement food stocks of households, soup kitchens, and food banks. Congress appropriated

\$45 million in FY 1999 for food and support of distributing agencies, plus \$90 million under the Food Stamp Program for the purchase of additional food.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program distributes food directly to women, infants, children and elderly, with food packages tailored to the nutritional needs of participants. More than 376,000 people participate monthly. For FY 1999, Congress appropriated \$86 million.

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations supplies commodity foods to low-income families who live on Indian reservations and to Native Americans living near reservations. More than 124,000 people participate each month. The FY 1999 Congressional appropriation is \$75 million.

Food assistance for disaster relief is furnished by FNS to State relief agencies and organizations like the Red Cross and Salvation Army in times of emergency such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and winter storms. Depending on the nature and severity of the crisis, FNS may provide commodity foods for distribution to shelters and mass feeding sites; or commodity food packages for distribution directly to families in need; or approve issuance of emergency food stamps. Tens of thousands of survivors of natural disasters are fed by FNS and its state and local partners every year.

Team Nutrition is the FNS nutrition education program, which furnishes information and materials to schools, technical assistance to food service staffs, and educational materials to programs like WIC and food stamps. Congress appropriated \$10 million for FY 1999.

The Nutrition Program for the Elderly distributes cash and commodity foods to States for meals served in senior citizen centers or delivered by meals-on-wheels programs. USDA provides reimbursement for more than 20 million meals a month. Congress appropriated \$140 million for the program for FY 1999.

Nutrition Assistance Programs in Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and the Northern Marianas Islands provide block grant cash and coupons to participants rather than food stamps or commodities. For FY 1999, Congress appropriated \$1.24 billion to Puerto Rico and \$10.4 million to the Pacific Islands.

For more information on the USDA Food and Nutrition Service and its programs, contact the FNS Public Information Staff. Call 703-305-2286, or write to 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 819, Alexandria, Virginia 22302. Fact sheets and program information are available on the FNS home page at www.fns.usda.gov. FNS was formerly known as the Food and Consumer Service.