

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2015**

May 4, 2015

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HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND BALANCED MEALS**

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Please Note: This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in Fiscal Year 2015, but is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

STRATEGIC GOAL: ALL OF AMERICA'S CHILDREN HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND BALANCED MEALS

IMPROVE PROGRAM ACCESS AND REDUCE HUNGER

Characteristics of Community Eligibility Provision Schools

All local education agencies (LEAs) and schools may apply to use the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) if they meet certain criteria. This study would examine the characteristics of schools that are using CEP, including the number of free and reduced-price eligible students in those schools and LEAs. The review will provide a basis to assess the impact of the identified student percentage (ISP) multiplier on program access, coverage, and per meal costs to LEAs and the Federal government. Results could inform potential adjustments to optimize CEP.

The Impact of SNAP Eligibility and Benefit Parameters on Low-Income Households

The SNAP benefit formula includes a number of income deductions (with related caps and conditions) and other parameters that are designed to ensure that all households receive enough to ensure that their benefits, combined with their own resources, allow them to purchase the Thrifty Food Plan. Many of these parameters were set long ago and may no longer reflect the circumstances of today's low-income households. This study will use extant data to examine spending patterns among such households to assess whether current SNAP parameters are based on realistic assumptions regarding household expenditures for food, shelter, medical care and dependent care.

Identifying Program Components and Practices that Influence Application Processing Time and Timeliness Rates

Many States have problems with completing SNAP certification and recertification actions timely, potentially compromising access to benefits among eligible people. While application timeliness varies widely across States, data is limited on the policy and operational factors that may influence timeliness. This study will review program data including administrative and demonstration project waivers, States' use of policy options, and business processes to identify practices that States that may impede or facilitate application processing times. These data will be analyzed in an effort to determine which program components or practices are associated with better timeliness outcomes, to inform potential strategies to improve timeliness.

Unprocessed Fruit and Vegetable Pilot Assessment

Section 4202 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 authorized a pilot project providing a limited number of schools flexibility in using a portion of their USDA Foods entitlement dollars to purchase locally-grown unprocessed fruits and vegetables for the National School Lunch Program. Eight States were selected to operate the pilot. This project will assess the satisfaction of the participating States, as well as report on State-level measures of the sources, type, quantity and cost of produce acquired, and provide a synthesis of benefits and challenges of the operating the pilot.

Retail Value of the FDPIR Food Package

This project will update the estimates of the retail value of the average Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) food package. As with a previous report on this subject, the resulting estimates will be compared to the level of benefits provided to SNAP participants.

IMPROVE NUTRITION AND REDUCE OBESITY

Study on Sodium Targets and School Meals

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 required USDA to establish new school meal standards based on recommendations of the Institute of Medicine, including targets for sodium over the next several years. Implementation began in 2012. A number of stakeholders have expressed concerns about the feasibility of implementing the sodium standards because of the limited number of products available to schools to meet them. At the same time, many schools are reporting that they have achieved compliance. This study will examine the market availability of foods that meet the current and future requirements under program rules. It will also conduct case studies of schools that are doing well on sodium reduction to document the keys to their success. Results will inform future technical assistance efforts for schools, as well as efforts to encourage marketplace development of palatable lower-sodium products.

Extend the WIC “Feeding My Baby” Study to the Fifth Birthday

The FNS-sponsored “Feeding My Baby Study, a longitudinal study that began data collection in Fall 2013, provides a rare opportunity to examine critical policy questions about WIC and its participants. The data collection currently follows a nationally-representative sample of infants who began WIC participation at birth, and will collect data from all of them, including those who leave WIC, every three to six months through their third birthdays. This additional investment will extend data collection through participants’ fifth birthdays. The surveys are coupled with 24-hour dietary recalls and focus on feeding practices, including where caregivers obtain information about feeding practices, their intentions to breastfeed or use formula, and the duration of both. It will also show the timing of the introduction of solids and the types of foods the infants eat as they transition to toddlers and preschool children. This data is coupled with height and weight measures, which will provide critical information on links between feeding practices and early-childhood obesity risk factors. By following both those who stay in WIC and those who leave, the data collection will provide important information about program retention and loss, and will examine the reasons caregivers choose to discontinue their participation, and how many return after leaving during the child’s first five years. This extension will substantially increase the return on investment on this already valuable study.

Regional Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Centers of Excellence (RNECE)

FNS will support an additional year of this joint FNS and National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) grant program designed to build the evidence-base for nutrition education and obesity prevention strategies and interventions that produce measurable improvements in health outcomes and prevent/reduce the incidence of obesity. The program is also intended to develop effective policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) approaches for obesity prevention. In FY 2014, four regional centers were established to develop signature research projects tailored

to address specific regional needs and administer sub-grants program for States in their respective regions. In FY 2015 there will be additional work on developing effective public health approaches to obesity prevention by focusing on PSE approaches.

PROMOTE PROGRAM INTEGRITY AND REDUCE IMPROPER PAYMENTS

Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification (APEC) III Study

This periodic study examines improper payment rates in the school meals programs. Previous cycles have clarified the major sources of program errors at the national level, and have shown that previous strategies to reduce errors had positive impacts on only portions of the problem. APEC III will provide new, nationally-representative estimates of error rates, and will build on prior versions by exploring means to update the estimates with more frequent and limited indicator data. The project will also seek to develop State-specific error rates for the largest States and groups of smaller States. The intended result is to provide quicker feedback on the effectiveness of policy and operational changes in reducing error and better data for targeted action, accelerating the cycle of program improvement. A sub-study will explore the accuracy of direct certification with Medicaid.

Using Data Matching in the School Meals Eligibility Process

A recent Government Accountability Office report¹ recommended that USDA explore electronically matching household-application information to other data sources—such as State income databases or public-assistance databases—to verify their accuracy and improve the certification process. This project will update previous USDA work in this area to determine if data systems and datasets (e.g., Medicaid or Unemployment Insurance) can be linked to application information in a manner that supports timely and accessible certifications and used as the basis for verification for cause and other error-reduction strategies. Promising approaches identified through this review will be piloted in a limited number of local educational authorities to test their feasibility, as well as their impact on program participation and improper payments.

Synthesis of Prior School Meal Integrity Studies and Pilots

FNS recently published the latest findings on school meals erroneous payments through the APEC II study. Previous efforts to explore and assess methods for reducing school meal erroneous payments include a series of pilot projects on the impacts of changes in verification, examination of the impacts of the existing verification process, and an ongoing series of reports on application processing accuracy. This project will provide a comprehensive synthesis and critique of this work to highlight lessons learned, knowledge gaps that remain, and promising practices that warrant further explorations. In particular, it will consider the extent to which expansion of direct certification, the community eligibility provision and other recent program changes could be used to mitigate the access barriers observed in previously pilot tested error-reduction changes. The results will inform ongoing efforts to reduce school meals error rates, as well as future research and analysis efforts to support this goal.

¹ Government Accountability Office, *School Meals Programs, USDA Has Enhanced Controls, but Additional Verification Could Help Ensure Legitimate Program Access*, May 2014.

Cognitive Testing for Improvement of School Meals Applications

Previous studies identified household misreporting as a source of substantial error in the school meals certification process. Households often report income and/or number of family members incorrectly. This study will examine the role of the application form and instructions in misreporting: to what extent are families misunderstanding the instructions; how could the paper forms used by school districts be redesigned to foster accurate reporting without creating a barrier to participation; and to what extent would expanded use of technology (such as web-based applications and smart phone application apps) make applications easier to complete accurately? The results of this project could be used to improve the model application and instructions offered by FNS for use by school districts, and/or to inform changes in the required elements for the district-level applications themselves.

Extent of SNAP Benefit Trafficking: 2012-2014

This project will update estimates of the extent of trafficking – the exchange of food benefits for cash – using the results of undercover investigations and electronic benefit transfer (EBT)-based administrative case actions against retailers suspected of trafficking. The update of this key program performance metric will cover the period 2012-2014. This project will also develop and apply a regression adjustment, based on the recommendations of a 2013 technical working group, to the estimates and compare the results to those generated using the current methodology.

Feasibility of Applying Behavioral Economic Approaches to SNAP Fraud Prevention

Psychology and behavioral economic principles have been used to identify strategies that encourage healthy eating. This white paper will explore whether such principles could be applied to prevent SNAP recipient trafficking. Recipient trafficking occurs when a SNAP participant sells an EBT card for cash or uses it for other than its intended purpose. The white paper will examine the feasibility of identifying and using behavioral “nudges” to prevent recipient trafficking.

OTHER SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Child Nutrition Program Operations (CNOps)

FNS uses multi-year panel studies to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the school nutrition programs. This includes a wide range of descriptive information from the State and school district levels, as well as data on special topics of current interest, such as the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education and promotion in schools, policies regarding unpaid meal balances, professional standards and training requirements, and the use of behavioral economics in the school food environment. The panel data will cover the four school years (SY) starting with SY 2015-2016. Results are used to inform program management and policy development.

Child Nutrition Analysis and Modeling

This project will provide FNS with the ability to order quick turnaround analyses and other short duration research, review, and report-writing tasks on an as-needed basis. Task orders under this project will support Child Nutrition and Food Distribution policymaking and management.

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: Report to Congress

This project will generate the required annual report to Congress on the effectiveness of State and local efforts to certify SNAP participant children for free school meals without the need for household applications. It will calculate state-specific performance metrics from data reported by State agencies and school food authorities. The project will also highlight direct certification operations in a handful of States for insight into successful strategies and promising practices.

National Survey of WIC Participants-III

This periodic study is the major source of information on a number of important program issues, including the program's rate of certification error and the percent of WIC participants receiving other program benefits. There have been significant program changes since the last data collection, including changes in the food packages, an increased reliance on EBT, and availability of the option for 12-month child certification. This project will update the study design, data collection instruments, and report elements based on stakeholder input, field the data collection, and analyze the data to meet the broadest range of WIC information needs.

WIC Food Package Costs and Cost Containment

Developed in response to a USDA Office of Inspector General report, this study will examine methods used by States to contain costs and their relative effectiveness.² There have been major changes to the program since the last comprehensive study on this topic was published in 2003. These include substantial revisions to food packages, expansion of EBT, and improvements in vendor management such as use of peer groups. This study will provide a national picture of the use of various cost containment practices; help identify advanced approaches to develop competitive price and reimbursement rules that could be adopted by States; and examine their possible impact on program cost, food instrument redemption rates, and variety of foods selected by participants. Results would be used to identify and disseminate best practices to move States to improve performance.

WIC Participant and Program Characteristics (WIC PC) 2016

This project will generate two reports and supporting datasets using information from State management information systems based on a near census of WIC participants. One report will provide summary information on participant income, nutrition risk, breastfeeding initiation, and demographic characteristics. The second will summarize types and quantities of food prescribed to participants. The results provide a wide range of demographic information on WIC clients, as well measures of program performance. As part of the project, FNS will integrate a reporting interface based on the Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System (PedNSS) portal, thus allowing automated edit checking of State data submissions and rapid generation of State-specific reports, and obviating the need for separate data submissions by States for the national WIC PC report.

WIC Analysis and Modeling

This project will provide FNS with the ability to order quick turnaround analyses and other short duration research, review, and report-writing tasks on an as-needed basis. Task orders under this project will support WIC program policy making and management.

² Office of Inspector General, USDA, *States' Food Costs for the FNS' Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children*. Audit 27004-0001-22, September 2014.

WIC Eligibles Estimates - National and State

This project, the latest in a series, will develop a set of national and State level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for WIC program benefits in 2013. This project will develop estimates by participant subgroup at the national level, and will prepare coverage rates for all national and State level estimates. These estimates are used in the budget process to support program management and to address program performance.

Measuring SNAP Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation)

This ongoing project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address SNAP participation trends and impacts; generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates and patterns of participation; and supports the Agency's capacity to assess cost and distributional impacts of proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.

Best Practices in SNAP Employment and Training Programs

The Agricultural Act of 2014 requires a review every 5 years of existing programs and research to identify best practices in employment and training program components. This review will identify program components and practices that effectively assist SNAP participants in gaining skills, training, work, or experience that will increase their ability to obtain regular employment. The review will also identify which components are best integrated with statewide workforce development systems.

Quick Turnaround Studies

FNS will launch a series of short-turnaround studies in order to provide needed data on critical topics on a shorter timeframe than many of the longer, in-depth studies FNS sponsors. In FY 2015, we will initiate development of questionnaires on topics including sub-State participation levels and whole-grain product usage in child nutrition, and use of the cash value voucher and child retention issues in WIC, among other items of current interest.