

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2016**

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Please Note: This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in fiscal year 2016, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

INTRODUCTION

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) conducts a variety of studies, evaluations, and related activities that respond to the needs of policymakers and managers and help ensure that nutrition assistance programs achieve their goals effectively. This plan provides short descriptions of projects that are expected to be launched in fiscal year (FY) 2016. It reflects decisions by FNS's program and research staff and leadership on the best use of available research funding to meet current information needs that are aligned with agency priorities to improve program access, nutrition, and program integrity. It was developed in consultation with the agencies of the Research, Education, and Economics (REE) mission area and the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP).

In addition to consulting on the development of the annual Research and Evaluation Plan, REE staff members regularly participate as valued experts in the development of study design specifications and data collection plans, and they also serve on advisory and technical panels for the studies. CNPP provides critical consultation on studies collecting nutrition-related data, such as those examining nutrition standards in school meals and the WIC food packages.

REE and FNS agencies also partner directly on a range of key projects that reflect USDA's cross-cutting goals to reduce food insecurity and hunger, improve nutrition, and reduce obesity. These include the work that FNS carries out with the Economic Research Service on food security measurement, studies of food acquisition and purchases by low-income families and others, and the use of behavioral economics to improve food choices through the nutrition assistance programs. They also include the work conducted through partnerships between FNS and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to improve diets through such efforts as the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program and the university-based grants to build the evidence base and develop innovative strategies for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) program and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) interventions.

Through these partnerships, USDA ensures that we utilize the respective strengths and expertise of each in support of the USDA mission. Close collaboration across the Department ensures the studies included in the plan reflect the best science to inform evidence-based policy development in Federal nutrition assistance programs.

IMPROVE PROGRAM ACCESS AND REDUCE HUNGER

Evaluation of Alternatives to Improve Elderly Access

States currently operate a number of demonstration projects designed to improve program access among the elderly and disabled. These include Combined Application Projects, Elderly Simplified Application Projects, and Standard Medical Deduction projects. While these projects vary in terms of how they operate, all are intended to simplify program access for vulnerable populations. States are required to periodically submit project data to FNS, but this data is often focused on cost-neutrality requirements, and thus it does not provide the information needed to assess whether these projects increase participation, reduce churning, or otherwise simplify

program access. This study would fill that gap by collecting survey data from participants and administrative data from States operating one or more of these projects to evaluate the extent to which these projects improve program access, whether certain program models or combinations of projects are more effective than others, and what tradeoffs exist between program simplification/access goals and ensuring benefit adequacy. The study may also include interviews with State or local staff who operate these programs.

Analysis of the Impact of the Expiration of Time-Limit Waivers on ABAWD participation

As the economy has continued to improve, few States qualify for statewide waivers of Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) time limits. While many States have sought waivers for particular geographic areas, others no longer have any waived areas, subjecting all ABAWD within those States to the 3-month time limit if they do not meet SNAP work or training requirements. This study would use extant data, including SNAP administrative data, Quality Control (QC) data, and labor force data, to estimate the impacts of newly introduced time limits on ABAWD in unwaived areas. The results of this analysis, while descriptive in nature, could provide information on whether ABAWD leave SNAP due to employment, leave SNAP due to time limits, or remain on SNAP while working or participating in a qualifying employment or training activity.

Studies on Technology Modernization for SNAP Benefit Redemption

Section 4011 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 amended SNAP, and the authorizing legislation allows the use of SNAP Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) benefits through mobile technologies and online transactions. Before implementation, the Act requires FNS to carryout demonstration projects to test the feasibility of redeeming SNAP benefits through these new technologies. FNS is required to submit reports to Congress on the projects, including one on mobile technologies and one on online transactions that details the impact on participant access, the ease of use, and program integrity. The studies may include interviews and collaboration with relevant stakeholders to gather lessons learned and implementation challenges, as well as surveys to measure customer satisfaction with the new technologies.

Characteristics of Summer Food Service Participants and Programs

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) serves only a small percentage of the children who receive free and reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program during the school year. This study, updating data collected in the summer of 2015, will provide greater insight into who offers and who uses SFSP meals, as well as who is eligible for the program, but not enrolled. While the 2015 study focused heavily on provider characteristics, this study will extend the view to program participants, examining who participates in SFSP programs. The study will consider family characteristics, location – such as differences in rural and urban areas, and families’ views of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, as well as what other resources they may be accessing for food assistance in the summer. It will also focus on non-participating families and examine their views of the program, considering ways to increase the program’s accessibility.

Mobile Technology for Child Nutrition

Cell phone applications and related mobile technology offers the possibility to improve services, effectiveness, participation, and customer satisfaction in the Child Nutrition Programs.

Examples of potential applications include SFSP site locators, school meal information (e.g., menu choices) and advance meal ordering for parents and students, as well as short training and reinforcing messages for meal providers on issues such as food safety. Many of these strategies may integrate the principles of behavioral economics. This project will involve other Federal agencies, and it might also potentially include other entities, such as small businesses, to develop and test the effectiveness of such applications for consideration by FNS and State agencies. Those who use behavioral economics approaches will be considered for their impact as compared to those who do not.

Study of Non-Response to School Meals Income Verification

One concern about the impact of the school meals verification process is the potential for children in low-income families to lose benefits for which they are eligible due to non-response to a verification request. This study will use a prior study of verification outcomes in large metropolitan school districts to provide a current picture of the verification results in contrast to an independently determined measure of family income. Where possible, the study will re-visit the same communities studied in 2002 and determine if verification accuracy has changed. Additional sites will also be selected to provide a diverse selection of metropolitan areas in terms of geographic region, size, and direct certification coverage.

Evaluation of OnLine Ordering of WIC Foods

Redemption of WIC food benefits requires a large number of decisions by participants and their caregivers at the point of sale. The complexity of this process, and the other pressures of carrying it out publicly in a retail food store, can lead participants to make food package choices that are less useful, palatable, or cost-effective than they could be. Further, food selection errors can result in embarrassment for the participant and delays at checkout that may contribute to incomplete benefit receipt and/or early exit from WIC. This pilot project will examine and evaluate the use of online ordering of WIC foods for in-store pickup. The evaluation would explore participant, vendor, and WIC staff satisfaction, benefit use, participant retention, the nutrition and cost of the foods received, as well as impacts on local service delivery. This study will also examine the feasibility of developing several behavioral and market measures of individual vendor quality using food benefit redemption data, which can define how the participant experience at a vendor can impact shopping patterns and retention.

WIC-Eligibles Estimates

This annual project will develop the latest set of national- and State-level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for the WIC program benefits in 2014. The report will present estimates by participant subgroup at the national level and 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.

IMPROVE NUTRITION AND REDUCE OBESITY

Analysis of SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed) Data for All States

This study will assess program data to examine the costs, reach, scope, and obesity prevention outcomes of SNAP-Ed programs. This study will also assess to what degree the SNAP-Ed programs align with guidance in the SNAP-Ed evaluation framework, especially as they relate to

the use of evidence-based strategies and interventions, including policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) approaches included in the FNS/NCCOR SNAP-Ed Toolkit. The analysis will use FY 2014, FY 2015, and FY 2016 State SNAP-Ed plans and Annual SNAP-Ed Evaluation Reports, as well as data from the Education and Administrative Reporting System (EARS) and SNAP-Ed expenditure data. The objectives are to: 1) assess adherence of program delivery to State plans, program reach and costs; 2) determine which types of program delivery models yield better results; and 3) create, test, and validate a standardized template States can use when submitting their year-end reports using indicators from the SNAP-Ed evaluation framework.

Understanding of the Dietary Guidelines Among SNAP Participants

This project is a collaborative effort between FNS and the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP). CNPP develops messaging for specific audiences to communicate the recommendations from the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) and MyPlate to promote healthier eating behaviors. The project will develop and administer a survey to better understand awareness of messages among SNAP participants and low-income individuals eligible for nutrition assistance programs. The survey will provide continuous insight into the ability of these messages to influence behavior and help determine best practices for the health promotion community.

Assessment of SFSP Meal Quality

While FNS regularly obtains information on the foods and nutrients provided by school meals through the School Nutrition Dietary Assessment reports and is obtaining information on the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal quality in 2016, little data is available on the content of SFSP meals. This study will begin collecting and analyzing menus obtained from a small number of SFSP providers, both to provide a quick case study picture of SFSP meals and to inform the design of a larger scale data collection and analysis. The larger assessment will provide a national description of the foods and nutrients provided to children through the SFSP on average and provide information on the range encompassed by the highly decentralized service delivery inherent in this program. The findings will be compared to program requirements, external nutrition standards (e.g., the DRIs and DGAs), and similar metrics on CACFP and school meals. A sub-study will examine food waste at a small number of SFSP sites.

Farm-to-School Census for School Year 2016/2017

The Farm-to-School Census (i.e., the Census) is a national survey of all school districts (public, private, and charter schools) participating in the National School Lunch Program that asks about their involvement in farm-to-school activities. Additionally, the Census also prioritizes gathering procurement data related to local sourcing, with documentation of additional farm-to-school activities (e.g., the prevalence of school gardens, promotional activities, and curriculum integration, etc.) as a secondary objective.

Aligning Food Package Prescriptions to Breastfeeding Practice

The WIC food packages for breastfeeding women vary in foods and quantities, depending upon breastfeeding exclusivity or supplementation with infant formula. Previous research¹ found that the questions used to determine the extent of breastfeeding in prescribing packages vary among local WIC agencies. This project would then use quantitative, qualitative, and psychometric methods, including cognitive testing, to determine a more consistent method to assess breastfeeding in the WIC setting to support food package assignment, tailoring, and reporting.

Participant Research to Enhance WIC Services

One of the keys to WIC's ongoing success is the package of nutrition services and education it provides to help participants use the benefits package effectively and improve nutrition and health behavior. A critical juncture in the WIC process is when participants redeem benefits at WIC vendors. This project will support a set of grants to learn more about personal factors, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of WIC participants and WIC-eligible individuals who come from diverse social and cultural environments, along with their experiences at vendors. Quantitative and qualitative data will be collected and used to develop interactive tools and other technical resources to build capacity for WIC staff to tailor and enhance service delivery that affects nutrition and health behaviors and also helps with the retail experience. The ultimate goal is to improve WIC services in order to increase participation in nutrition education, encourage retention, and better support positive nutrition behavior change.

Support for NHANES Diet Quality of WIC Participants

This project provides support for the addition of data elements (including preschool iron status measures) and sample size to the HHS-conducted National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) to ensure that the resulting dataset can be used for rigorous analysis of WIC participants' nutrition and health status. The NHANES data enables tracking of changes over time in the comparison of WIC-participating children to low-income non-participants and higher income children.

PROMOTE PROGRAM INTEGRITY AND REDUCE IMPROPER PAYMENTS

Quantifying the Extent of Identity Theft in SNAP

Recently, a number of reports have suggested the potential for identity theft in Federal benefit programs. This study will work with one or two States to quantify the extent of identity theft in SNAP. The study design may involve obtaining caseload and other data from a State and working with a third party to identify behaviors or markers (such as multiple online applications submitted from the same URL, or multiple EBT cards sent to the same physical address) potentially linked to identity theft and to use these markers to estimate the prevalence of identity theft in SNAP.

Feasibility of Revising the SNAP Quality Control Review Process

The Office of the Inspector General has recommended that FNS conduct a cost/benefit analysis of changing the QC system from a two-tier process that relies on States to review SNAP cases

¹ *WIC Breastfeeding Policy Inventory* (Forrestal et al, 2014. On the web at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic-breastfeeding-policy-inventory>)

and make payment error determinations with a subsample re-reviewed by FNS employees to a one-tier process, where only FNS or an unaffiliated, contracted third-party reviews SNAP cases for errors. This study will identify the components and processes required by a one-tier process where one central organization within FNS conducts the QC reviews for all 53 State agencies. This feasibility study will assess the costs, staffing and organization changes, system requirements, data-sharing agreements, and access to State or other databases that are needed to convert the current QC review process to a one-tier review process conducted by Federal reviewers.

Evaluation of the Direct Certification with Medicaid (DC-M) Demonstrations

Several States are now adding Medicaid to their list of programs used for Direct Certification. This study will conduct a process evaluation to examine how States are connecting their School Food Authority data with their Medicaid data, including linking two different systems for determining household income, linking different administrative systems, and communicating their direct certification results with households. The study will replicate the factors considered in the Direct Certification Improvement Study to identify best practices to share with other States as the program expands to additional areas.

Evaluation of the NSLP Data Matching Pilot

In FY 2015, FNS began development of a white paper on the potential for using data-matching of household application information to other data sources in order to support timely and accessible certifications, and it was used as the basis for verification for cause and other error-reducing strategies for NSLP. If this white paper identifies promising approaches, this project would field-test one or more of these approaches in a limited number of States and local education agencies and conduct a robust evaluation of their cost and effectiveness.

OTHER SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Assessment of Small Retailers' Scanner Capabilities

Section 4002 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 requires all SNAP authorized retailers to use scanner or product lookup entry technologies when redeeming SNAP benefits, unless the retailer is located in an area with significantly limited access to food. This study would identify the technological requirements necessary and barriers, including costs, small retailers must overcome to meet this requirement. It will include a survey of all small SNAP-authorized retailers to quantify how many stores may be affected by this requirement.

Study of Third-Party Processor Services, Fees, and Business Practices

Section 4002 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 requires all authorized retailers (except farmer's markets and certain other store types) to pay 100 percent of the costs of EBT point-of-sale equipment and related services. Many smaller stores that had previously received EBT equipment and services free-of-charge through EBT vendors are now required to procure equipment and services independently. In most cases, retailers procure both the equipment and related payment card services through a Third Party Processor (TPP), often in combination with credit and debit card services. There is considerable variation among TPPs in terms of the types of services offered, pricing structures, and contractual requirements. This study would collect information from retailers and TPPs on typical services offered and purchased, pricing models,

and other best practices that would facilitate improved FNS guidance to authorized retailers and inform future FNS policy regarding requirements for TPPs.

Assessment of States' Use of Computer-Matching Protocols in SNAP

This study will develop and administer a survey to all 53 SNAP State agencies to catalog how States are currently using or planning to use computer-matching strategies to reduce recipient fraud, payment errors, and administrative burden for both applicants and eligibility workers. Some systems must be used by law, such as the Prisoner Verification System, the Social Security Administration Death Match, and, more recently, the National Directory of New Hires. The use of other matching systems varies by State. The assessment will also quantify the cost of computer-matching and the number of matches by system.

Support for National Household Food Acquisition and Purchase Survey (FoodAPS)

FNS will provide funds to the Economic Research Service to collect a second round of FoodAPS data. Building on the lessons learned from the first FoodAPS data collection, this round will seek to improve response rates and data quality. The sample design will again oversample SNAP households and SNAP-eligible non-participants at lower income ranges. The sample design will also seek to obtain nationally representative data on WIC participants, children in different age groups participating in child nutrition programs, and enable analyses that compare urban and rural households. This funding will also support a Call for Papers that will use the FoodAPS data to explore policy-relevant questions about the interactions between nutrition assistance program participation, food demand, nutrition, and food security. The papers would be presented at a National Bureau of Economic Research Conference and published in academic journals.

Evaluation of Child Nutrition Special Grants

The authorizing legislation for the Child Nutrition Programs provides funding for a number of different grants intended to stimulate program improvement. This includes Team Nutrition Grants, Administrative Reviews and Training Grants, Direct Certification Improvement Grants, Equipment Purchase Grants, and Farm-to-School Grants. This project will independently evaluate the impacts of these grants on their intended outcomes, and inform decisionmaking on continuing these grants or changing their size or scope. As part of the project, it will frame revisions to grant requirements to improve grantee reporting and participation in the evaluation.

Quick Response Studies for Child Nutrition

In addition to its large-scale evaluations, FNS is building the capacity to field single-topic studies with shorter timeframes that respond to current policy needs. This funding will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decisionmaking.

Assessment of Alternatives to the State Administrative Expense (SAE) Formula

The Child Nutrition programs have changed substantially since the SAE formula was last revised in the 1990s. This project will assess the effectiveness of the current formula used for State administrative expense fund allocations and develop and test a range of possible alternative algorithms to improve the formula.

Assessment of CN Data Systems Information Integrity

In FY 2014, FNS initiated a study to provide a comprehensive view of the data collected at the Federal, State, and local levels to determine what data are available that could inform program policy without increasing the data collection burden on program partners. This study will continue and extend this effort to determine the accuracy of the administrative data submitted to the Federal level on key measures, such as meal counts and program participation. The study will identify potential points of error related to data collection and aggregation and identify best practices in ensuring data accuracy.

Study of School Food Authority (SFA) Procurement Practices

This study would be a nationally representative descriptive study of current procurement practices used by SFAs, including the scope and nature of food service management company contracts, cooperative buying arrangements, recordkeeping used to track rebates, discounts, credits, local purchasing preferences, and food purchasing specifications.

Assessment of the Administrative Review Process

FNS has recently launched a new Administrative Review process for the school meals programs. This study will assess the extent to which these reviews effectively identify risk areas and noncompliance with program requirements. Findings will help to ensure that State agencies are able to provide meaningful technical assistance and require appropriate corrective action for noncompliance. The study will also examine the management of review and oversight resources. Where weaknesses in process or outcomes are found, the project will seek to identify more effective methods already in use in Government and/or industry for application in school meals.

WIC EBT Issuance and Redemption Transaction Database (eBIRT)

Every WIC State agency is required to implement EBT statewide by October 1, 2020, per the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. WIC EBT systems gather transaction data that includes the specific items, quantities, and prices of foods selected in redeeming benefits. A recent USDA-sponsored study² demonstrated the value of WIC EBT transaction data to understand variations in patterns of WIC-benefit redemption. This project will explore the feasibility of FNS gathering States' WIC EBT issuance and transaction data; link it to participant, vendor, and program characteristics data; and generate public use and restricted use data sets and analytical reports. The database and reports could serve as an ongoing source of valuable information for policy officials, WIC program managers, and the research community. This feasibility study will consider the strengths and weaknesses of such a database, including impacts on States and costs of gathering the data, along with possibilities for research to inform program knowledge.

WIC Food Package Policy Options Study-3

In 2011 and 2015, FNS published a report on the choices each WIC State agency had made in 2009 and 2014, respectively, in exercising the flexibilities allowed under the new WIC food packages. Since this early implementation, States have made numerous adjustments to their policy choices. This study would update the previous studies with an examination of which foods States offer in their food packages.

² *Transition to EBT in WIC: Review of Impact and Examination of Participant Redemption Patterns* (Phillips et al, 2012. On the web at http://altarum.org/sites/default/files/uploaded-publication-files/Altarum_Transition%20to%20WIC%20EBT_Final%20Report_071614.pdf)

WIC Food Package Cost Report

This report series determines the pre- and post-rebate cost to WIC of providing foods for 17 food categories. The most recent report³, which was for FY 2010, estimated the national average food package cost by participant category. This part of the series will examine the possibility of further sub-categories for the fully- and partially-breastfeeding food packages and the formula food package. These estimates contribute to WIC cost projections and the cost of legislative and regulatory alternatives. This project would provide estimates for FY 2015 and the contract vehicle to obtain additional years' estimates.

Quick Response Task Orders for WIC

In FY 2015 FNS awarded a contract for quick response studies to provide needed data on critical topics on a shorter timeframe than is possible under longer, indepth studies. In FY 2016, FNS anticipates developing questionnaires for WIC on topics such as State and sub-State participation levels by category and a child's age, use of the cash value voucher (e.g., percent unused, percent used at maximum, and average by participant category), and child retention issues, among other items of current interest.

³*Fiscal Year 2010 WIC Food Cost Report*. Vericker et al, 2013. On the web at <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic-food-package-cost-report-fiscal-year-2010>