

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE (FNS)  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2017**

**March 2017**

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***Please Note:*** This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in fiscal year 2017, but it is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

## **FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2017**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 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) 2017. It reflects decisions by FNS' 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 projects include the work that FNS carries out with the Economic Research Service on food security measurement, and studies of food acquisition and purchases by low-income families and others. The projects 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.

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

**STRATEGIC GOAL: ALL OF AMERICA’S CHILDREN  
HAVE ACCESS TO SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND BALANCED MEALS  
IMPROVE PROGRAM ACCESS AND REDUCE HUNGER**

**Evaluation of Online Ordering of WIC Foods**

This project explores a key policy option for improving Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) retention—shaping the retail shopping experience. Redemption of WIC food benefits requires a large number of decisions by participants 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 project will examine and evaluate the use of online ordering of WIC foods for in-store pick-up. The evaluation would explore participant, vendor, and WIC staff satisfaction; benefit use; participant retention; the nutrition and cost of the foods received; and impacts on local service delivery.

**Enhance WIC Program Access and Service Delivery**

Not all women, infants, and children eligible for WIC enroll directly in the program, without a referral, in order to receive the services and benefits provided. This study will use data from a limited number of states to examine opportunities to enhance referrals to WIC from other Federal and non-Federal programs in order to inform State guidance. The study will identify WIC-eligible individuals who are participating in other assistance programs, and work to identify and evaluate approaches to connect these individuals to WIC. The study will also strengthen WIC’s referral process and enhance service delivery by identifying WIC families that are likely eligible for, but not participating in, the various programs considered. This study will develop and refine methods of collecting, matching, sharing, and analyzing program administrative data that can be replicated in other States. Lessons learned and approaches found to increase referrals into WIC and from WIC to other programs will be published in a guidance document for State and local staff.

**Understanding Reasons for Discontinuing WIC Benefits**

WIC participation rates among eligible families decline as children increase in age (up to the age of 5 years), for reasons that are not fully understood. To identify potential interventions or policy changes to enhance program retention, this study will analyze data collected for the FNS-sponsored “Feeding My Baby” study, a longitudinal study of a representative sample of WIC caregivers and their children over the first 5 years of the child’s life. This project will focus on data collected over the first 24 months after the child’s birth to determine the percent of families that stop participating in WIC services during these years, reasons for and factors associated with discontinuing WIC, and whether the family re-applies for benefits. Depending on the number of families that re-enter WIC, the study will also examine factors associated with re-applying for WIC services.

**Technology Modernization for SNAP Benefit Redemption**

Section 4011 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 authorized the use of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits through mobile technologies and online transactions.

While mobile technology is already in use, FNS will carry out demonstration projects to test the feasibility of redeeming SNAP benefits through online transactions. FNS is required to submit a report to Congress on the results, including the impact on participant access, ease of use, and program integrity. The study will build upon our understanding of SNAP access, particularly for the elderly and disabled and individuals living in underserved areas. It 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 online transactions.

### **Review of National Office Data Systems**

Recently, FNS has faced increased demand for more rapid and real-time presentation of results from implementation of different Child Nutrition program initiatives, particularly of the Summer Meals program, to better respond to urgent programmatic and policy questions. This exploratory study builds on other efforts to enhance FNS data systems with a review of the data collection activities at the National Office to explore the feasibility of collecting more granular and/or frequent administrative data on Child Nutrition programs within the context of regulatory and program reporting requirements and within the constraints faced by providers of Child Nutrition programs. New data collection is not anticipated for this study.

### **Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) for Children in Rural versus Urban Areas**

The Summer EBT for Children demonstrations were authorized and funded by Congress in 2010 as a complement to traditional summer meal sites. A rigorous evaluation showed that Summer EBT substantially reduced food insecurity among children. Based on this proven impact, FNS has continued to support these projects, and to use information from current sites to implement Summer EBT most efficiently and reach more children with this model. This study will examine differences in benefit use (participation, redemption), costs, barriers, and ease/difficulty of implementation of Summer EBT using existing EBT data collected from the 2016 grantees in rural and urban areas, as well as new data collected through a survey of grantee/site administrators to obtain information on program implementation and challenges. Findings will inform implementation of Summer EBT in rural and urban locations in 2017.

### **Retail Value of Commodity Food Supplemental Program**

This project will update the estimates of the retail value of the average Commodity Food Supplemental Program (CSFP) food package.

### **WIC Eligibles Estimates**

This project, the latest in an annual series, will develop a set of national- and State-level estimates of the number of individuals eligible for WIC program benefits in 2016. 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**

### **School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study (SNMCS)-2**

This comprehensive study, the next in a series, will examine the following: 1) food pattern and nutritional quality of the meals offered and purchased at school; 2) plate waste; 3) the school

nutrition environment; 4) school food service operations; 5) cost to produce school meals, as well as 6) student participation; 7) characteristics of the school lunch and breakfast programs; and 8) satisfaction and attitudes regarding the school lunch and breakfast programs. Information on dietary intake and body mass index will be collected from a subsample of students. Primary data collection will occur by school year (SY) 2019-2020 and will provide new information on implementation of the 2012 updated school meals nutrition standards, first assessed in SNMCS-1 during SY 2014-2015. The study will include estimates of the cost to prepare school meals for the non-contiguous portions of the United States.

### **Designing a Pilot to Measure the Impact of Restricting SNAP Purchases**

Many in the public health community argue that SNAP could more effectively support healthy food choices if restrictions were placed on the use of benefits for less healthy foods, especially sugar-sweetened beverages. Others claim that such restrictions would be administratively burdensome, overly paternalistic, potentially stigmatizing, and likely ineffective. Many aspects of this debate can best be addressed with empirical evidence. This study will help FNS better understand the requirements for operating and evaluating expanded SNAP food restrictions, preparing the agency in the event that a demonstration or broader implementation is directed in the future. It will include an evaluation strategy and pilot test with sufficient rigor and scale to provide that evidence base, including a methodology for capturing food purchases made by a SNAP household in a cash-only transaction.

### **Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) National Review**

Redemption of WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) benefits is about 40 percent nationally, less than what is observed for other Federal farmers market (FM) programs. This project, FNS' first study of FMNP, will provide policy and operational information to improve redemption rates and stakeholder satisfaction. It will collect information on FMNP eligibility, participation, characteristics, operation, benefit delivery and redemption, and previously documented barriers to participation for families and farmers. It will also seek to collect similar information from other Federal FM programs (e.g. Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program) for comparison. Qualitative data will be collected to explore the perspectives of FMNP participants and farmers with respect to program operations, the cost and burden of participation and the value of the benefits provided, reasons for redeeming or not redeeming FMNP vouchers, and suggestions for improving the program to increase benefit uptake.

### **Process and Use of WIC Nutrition Risk Assessment**

Women and children enrolling in WIC undergo a nutrition risk assessment that includes the collection of dietary, anthropometric, and health information. The goal of the assessment is to identify nutritional risks and to enhance the service and support provided by WIC in order to improve the health and development of program participants. This project will use qualitative and quantitative methods to examine how local WIC agencies use nutrition risk assessment information to deliver program benefits, including the tailoring of food packages and nutrition education, and how the process used is associated with dietary and health outcomes, the clinic experience, and retention in WIC. The findings of this study will be used to develop guidance for WIC staff to enhance service delivery that improves program retention and the nutrition and health of women and children who participate in WIC.

## **Support for National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) Data Collection on WIC Participants**

NHANES collects detailed information, including dietary intake, anthropometry, and health status, from a nationally representative sample of Americans annually to enable tracking of diet- and health-related information over time. This project provides support to increase the sample size for WIC-aged children in NHANES to ensure that the data set provides important ongoing nutrition monitoring information for this group, and can be used for rigorous analysis of dietary intake, nutrient status, growth, and health of infants and children participating in WIC, including comparisons to low income non-participants and children from higher income families. The project will also provide support to better understand the age and duration of WIC for NHANES survey participants.

## **PROMOTE PROGRAM INTEGRITY AND REDUCE IMPROPER PAYMENTS**

### **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, holding the potential to positively affect both access and errors in school meals certification. This study will conduct a process evaluation to examine how States are connecting school food authority data with 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 document how the direct certification policies under study affect certification for free and reduced price meals for the following individuals: 1) students not currently certified to participate in meal benefits, and 2) those who are certified based on a household application. The study will examine how States are conducting DC-M to identify best practices and potential process improvements to identify best practices to share with other States as the program expands to additional areas.

### **Feasibility of Revising the SNAP Quality Control (QC) Review Process**

USDA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) 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 and make payment error determinations with a subsample re-reviewed by FNS employees to a one-tier process, where only FNS or an unaffiliated 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 Independent Review Process**

The Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) included several provisions to help increase effectiveness and integrity in Child Nutrition programs. As part of an effort to decrease certification error during the eligibility determination process, Section 304 of the HHFKA requires certain local educational authorities to conduct a second, independent review of applications for free and reduced price meal benefits before eligibility determinations are made.

FNS published a final rule establishing the requirements related to the provision, which became effective in SY 2014-2015. This evaluation will assess the process and effectiveness of this requirement, and help to determine if changes in the process are necessary.

### **Child Nutrition Operations Study–III (CN-OPS-III)**

FNS uses multi-year panel studies to collect and analyze data on select operational aspects of the Child 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 covers the 4 school years starting with SY 2015-2016. FY 2017 funds will be used to support data collection in SY 2017-2018. Results are used to inform Child Nutrition program management and policy development.

### **Online Application Feasibility Study**

FNS recently designed a prototype Web-based school meal application to increase the accuracy of household reporting of information to determine eligibility for free and reduced price meals. This new study will test the utility of the new FNS online school meal application as a Web-based survey to estimate meal certification error in the population in the years between the Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification (APEC) studies. The online school meal application will be tested in a limited number of areas to determine comparability with the results of the APEC household survey. This white paper will include recommendations for any potential changes to the online school meal application in order to increase the accuracy of eligibility information.

### **WIC Certification Error Estimates – Aging for IPERA Reporting**

This project conducts the annual aging of data on WIC certification errors for reporting in the USDA financial reports. The project helps fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. Data from a national survey of WIC participants conducted in 2008-2009 are adjusted annually using data from the census of WIC participant administrative records contained in the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics (WIC PC) report series and other WIC administrative data.

## **OTHER SUPPORT FOR PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE**

### **Survey of SNAP and Work**

About one-third of SNAP households have earnings from employment, and improving the job prospects of SNAP participants is a major priority. But, little is known about the types of jobs held by these participants or the work histories of both the employed and those not currently working. This study will develop and conduct a nationally representative survey of SNAP participants (age 18 and older) to better understand their current and past work experience, education level, language skills, military service, and barriers to work (including disability). The survey will be designed with a large-enough sample to produce State-level estimates. Results will be used to provide data-driven responses to questions about SNAP and work, inform



employment and training strategies, and help to ensure that SNAP customer service meets the needs of the working poor.

### **Assessment of Mandatory Employment & Training (E&T) Programs**

States may make their SNAP E&T programs either mandatory or voluntary for work registrants. About half the States offer mandatory E&T programs to SNAP participants, but some States operate a mandatory program in a limited geographic area or for a particular subgroup, such as able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). Participants who fail to comply with mandatory E&T program requirements can be sanctioned and lose SNAP eligibility. The study will collect data across mandatory E&T States to assess the success of mandatory programs in helping SNAP participants do the following: 1) gain skills, certificates, and credentials; 2) gain stable, well-paying employment; and 3) move toward economic self-sufficiency. This study also seeks to better understand why many mandatory E&T participants are sanctioned, with particular attention to the role of initial referral and intake (or orientation) as a program leakage point that results in sanctions. In a limited number of States, a process evaluation will be conducted to understand the process for notifying participants and enrolling them in mandatory E&T programs.

### **Exploring the Causes of State Variances in SNAP Administrative Costs**

USDA's OIG recommended that FNS identify the causes of cost-per-case variances in SNAP administrative expenses between States. FNS published a study in 2008—*Feasibility of Assessing Causes of State Variation in Food Stamp Program Administrative Costs*—which recommended several studies that would provide a substantially enhanced understanding of State variation in administrative expenses. This study conducts a regression analysis of existing State-level time series of aggregate costs to model the relationship of certification costs to average eligibility worker pay, market pay for related occupations, case characteristics, frequency of certification and recertification, and State fiscal conditions and budget constraints.

### **Unified WIC Data Collection Strategy**

This project will advance the effort to unify multiple previous, separate data collection efforts into a state-of-the-art data system for faster and higher quality reporting to inform program and policy initiatives. The project will include the review of the existing WIC administrative data collections, including the Participant and Program Characteristics dataset, electronic benefit transfer issuance, and redemption data collection, as well as the design of a data collection strategy for WIC administration, evaluation, and rapid report generation. Stakeholders will be engaged throughout the project in order to inform a strategy that meets program and policy needs without increasing burden on program staff. The effort will build on lessons learned and data generated through other activities including WIC PC, WIC EBT Issuance and Redemption Transaction Database (eBIRT), and the National UPC Database. The effort will also examine the feasibility of integrating information on the following: 1) WIC program activities and policies, 2) technology platforms used to deliver services, and 3) the local environments of participants, to enhance data reporting and improve the ability of FNS to examine factors that contribute to WIC outcomes.

### **Evaluation of the 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, to inform decision making on how they are designed. As part of the project, it will frame revisions to grant requirements to improve grantee reporting and participation in the evaluation.

### **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.

### **Measuring SNAP Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation)**

This ongoing project 1) supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address SNAP participation trends and impacts; 2) generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates, and patterns of participation; and 3) supports the agency's capacity to assess cost and distributional impacts of proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.

### **WIC Food Package Cost Report (Annual)**

This annual report is an essential component of regulatory impact analyses (RIAs) on WIC food package changes. The report determines the pre- and post-rebate cost to WIC of providing foods for 17 food categories. The most recent report estimated the national average food package cost by participant category. These estimates contribute to WIC cost projections and costing of legislative and regulatory alternatives. This project would provide estimates for FY 2016 and the contract vehicle to obtain additional years' estimates.

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

FNS will continue its partnership with ERS 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 do the following: 1) obtain nationally representative data on WIC participants and children in different age groups participating in child nutrition programs, and 2) enable analyses that compare urban and rural households.

### **Exploratory Research on SNAP Using Extant Data**

FNS researchers and analysts will pursue exploratory research on SNAP using existing datasets such as USDA's FoodAPS, the Current Population Survey, and the American Community Survey. These smaller-scale studies will provide important information in shaping our understanding of the impacts of SNAP in a variety of policy areas. Topics may include the relationship between SNAP participation and food pantry use, the characteristics of non-

redeeming SNAP-authorized farmers markets, the diet quality of food insecure SNAP households, and the share of total household food acquisitions purchased with SNAP. Projects with significant results will be posted on the FNS Web site.

### **Quick Response Studies for FNS Programs**

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 and program needs. This funding will support these efforts to ensure FNS has multiple avenues available to support its practice of evidence-based decision making.

### **Communication of FNS Studies**

Clear communication of the intent and findings of FNS-sponsored studies is a priority to both encourage participation and share relevant study results to target audiences. Innovative communication strategies include animated videos and other audience-specific materials that are both engaging and informative. This funding will develop and test animated videos and other materials to communicate the purpose and findings of FNS studies.