

**NUTRITION ASSISTANCE STUDY AND EVALUATION PLAN
FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
FISCAL YEAR 2006**

November 17, 2005

The fiscal year 2006 study and evaluation agenda for the nutrition assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service addresses three key program priorities:

- **Improve program access** so that all those eligible for nutrition assistance are able to participate.
- **Improve program integrity** to strengthen operations and safeguard taxpayer investments.
- **Build a *HealthierUS* and address obesity** by better integrating nutrition education and promoting healthy eating and physical activity among those eligible for nutrition assistance.

Improve Program Access

- **Measuring Program Access, Trends, and Impacts** – This project supports several key analytic tools used to analyze program participation trends and impacts. It provides annual estimates of the percentage of eligible individuals who receive food stamps, for the nation as a whole and for individual states, providing a key measure of the program’s effectiveness in reaching its target population. The project also generates annual reports on the characteristics of food stamp participants. In addition, the project is the primary mechanism through which FNS estimates the caseload and budgetary impact of actual and proposed policy changes.
- **Improving the Food Stamp Certification Process** – Program policies and procedures combine to either encourage or discourage individuals from completing the application process. Among the suggestions for improving certification procedures are: adopting simpler and more standardized policies; incorporating alternatives to face-to face interviews; using technology to replace paper processing; and engaging non-governmental staff to carry-out key application functions. This study will examine the application process as it now operates and document the performance of current procedures in terms of applicant contacts, number of applications completed, number of approved/denied applications, and application processing times, accuracy and costs. The purpose of this study is to identify potential approaches that show promise for enhancing the application process and compare their performance.
- **Nebraska CACFP Rural Eligibility Pilot Project** – The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 reduces the area eligibility threshold for Tier I family or group day care homes in rural Nebraska from 50 percent to 40 percent of the children eligible for free and reduced price school meals. The evaluation is expected to examine the impact of the threshold change on the number of family day care homes (FDCHs) offering meals, the number of FDCHs in Tier I as a result of the demonstration, the geographical location of the

FDCHs, the services provided to eligible children, and the characteristics of eligible children. An evaluation is due to Congress by March 31, 2008.

Improve Program Integrity

- **School Lunch and Breakfast Meal Cost Study II** – Congress is concerned about the effect of rising food and labor costs on school meal programs. FNS awarded a contract in 2005 to update meal cost information. The study is using the same methodology used in SY 1992-93 to estimate the cost of producing reimbursable meals. This study is examining all revenues and expenditures as they relate to activities conducted by food service, including a la carte sales, joint food sales conducted with other organizations within the school and the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. The treatment of indirect costs and indirect cost rates as they relate to the food service account is of particular interest. In addition, this study will examine the amount of operating dollars remaining in the School Food Service account, reasons for these balances, and potential future outlays.
- **WIC Vendor Payment Error Estimation** – The Improper Payments Information Act requires that FNS make annual estimates of the amount of payment error in its major programs. Periodically, FNS conducts a national survey of WIC vendors in order to produce valid measures of payment error based on in-store compliance buys. This project will (1) explore methods (such as the post-stratified sampling procedures used to produce estimates of trafficking in the Food Stamp Program) to age the data from the national surveys so that annual estimates of WIC-vendor payment errors can be produced, (2) help FNS select among possible alternative methods, and (3) apply the chosen method to produce an annual payment error estimate for 2006/2007.
- **Evaluation of Direct Verification** – The CN and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 permits local educational agencies to directly verify approved household applications for school meals using income and program participation information from Food Stamps, FDPIR, TANF, Medicaid or similar income-tested programs. The Congressionally-directed evaluation will examine the effectiveness of direct verification in decreasing the portion of the verification sample that must be verified by contacting the household, while ensuring that adequate verification information is obtained. The evaluation is due to Congress by July 2008.

Build a HealthierUS/Obesity Prevention

- **Effect of Peer Counseling on Breastfeeding Initiation and Duration** – New peer counseling interventions (based on a literature review and input from practitioners and an expert panel) and an evaluation design have been completed. This project uses this design to assess the implementation and effectiveness of peer counseling interventions in the WIC program.
- **Evaluation of South Carolina Food Stamp Nutrition Education Demonstration** – This project will (1) examine the State's capacity to target nutrition education to women and their families participating in or eligible for food stamp benefits in a community with high rates of

diet-related health problems, and (2) assess the impacts of that education on dietary knowledge, motivation and behavior. The study will also test the usefulness of new and unique data sources to carry out the intervention and evaluate results. These data systems include the State's extensive information on client well-being and use of public services and food purchase information generated at the point-of-sale.

- **Food and Nutrition Information Center** – These funds will support the Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC) within the National Agriculture Library to systematically store and disseminate information on USDA's food assistance programs, nutrition education, and related nutrition topics.