

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2009**

RELEASED NOVEMBER 19, 2008

Note: As USDA is operating under a continuing budget resolution, this plan is subject to change based on available funding.

Ongoing Projects Requiring Additional Funding

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Measuring Access, Trends and Impacts: This ongoing project support several key analytic tools and analyses to address program participation trends and impacts. It provides annual estimates of the percentage of eligible individuals who receive food stamp benefits, a measure the program's effectiveness in reaching its target population. The project also generates annual reports on the characteristics of program participants. In addition, the project provides the primary mechanism through which FNS estimates the caseload and budgetary impact of actual and proposed policy changes.

Child Nutrition Programs

School Nutrition Dietary Assessment IV (SNDA-IV): The School Nutrition Dietary Assessment is conducted every five years, and enables FNS to measure the nutritional content and quality of meals served in the school meals programs. To initiate the fourth study in this series, FNS awarded a contract in FY 2008 that provided for the design work and information collection clearance package. FY 2009 funding will be used to execute the option to collect, analyze and report the data on the nutritional quality of National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program meals. Findings will address the foods and nutrients in meals offered and served (selected), and provide updated information on the school nutrition environment.

Assessment of CACFP Sponsor Tiering Determinations: To comply with the requirements of the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (IPIA), FNS annually measures the accuracy of reimbursement decisions made by sponsoring organizations in the CACFP, specifically sponsor determinations of which reimbursement tier to assign to Family Day Care Home providers. This item executes the next annual data collection and analysis to obtain and report on the accuracy of sponsor tiering decisions made in FY 2009. This information is used in agency reports to OMB and Congress required by the IPIA.

Aging Estimates of NSLP/SBP Erroneous Payments: Following the November 2007 issuance of *NSLP/SBP Access, Participation, Eligibility, and Certification Study – Erroneous Payments in the NSLP and SBP* (APEC), FNS must report annually on the amount of estimated improper payments in the NSLP and the SBP, along with activities and progress in reducing them, to comply with the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (IPIA). As part of the first APEC study, an econometric model was developed that will yield erroneous payments estimates for certification errors in future years based on district-level data provided on Form FNS-742 (SFA

Verification Summary Report) and State/national data from FNS' national data base. This study would prepare the input data files and run the econometric model to generate estimated values of the certification error rates.

Annual Estimation of Eligibles for NSLP: This annual optional task under the microsimulation contract (*Measuring SNAP Access, Trends and Impacts*) provides updated estimates of the number of children eligible for free and reduced price meals at the national and State levels. Estimates are based on the most recently available data from extant data sources such as the Current Population Survey (CPS) and the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP).

WIC Program

Changes to the WIC Birth Month Breastfeeding Package: In FY 2008, FNS with contractor support developed the design and information collection clearance package to assess the impacts of the changes in WIC food packages on breastfeeding initiation, duration, and intensity in early infancy. This assessment stems from the recommendation of an Institute of Medicine expert panel that urged study of this aspect of the food package changes due to the potential for unintended adverse effects on breastfeeding. FY 2009 funding will be used to execute contract options to complete data collection and reporting.

Aging Estimates of WIC Vendor Erroneous Payments: The Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 requires annual reporting of the level of erroneous payments in major government programs, including WIC. FNS meets this requirement for payments to WIC vendors through primary data collection (bookend studies) every 7 years, and aged estimates in the intervening years. FY 2009 funding will be used to exercise an option for one additional year of aged estimates based on FNS TIP data under an existing contract.

WIC Participant and Program Characteristics for 2010 (PC-2010): This item funds the biennial data collection and analysis of WIC participant administrative records. Since 1992, information from this data series has been used to monitor progress on performance measures and to support regulatory impact analyses, program management decisions, testimony to Congress, and public speeches by policy officials. It is also used to fulfill requirements for racial/ethnic reporting. FY 2009 funding will support the development work for collection and analysis of these data for 2010.

New Projects

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Health and Nutrition Promotion Grants and Evaluation: The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 provides \$20 million, which are available until expended, to pilot test the effect of incentives at the point-of-sale to encourage low-income persons to purchase more fruits, vegetables, or other healthy foods. The legislation calls for a rigorous evaluation that incorporates an experimental design to the extent possible to assess dietary and health impacts. Funds are expected to cover both pilot operations (including the cost of financial incentives) and

research costs. FY 2009 funding will be used for systematic consultation with and input from affected partners and interested stakeholders and acquisition of external support for pilot planning, implementation, and evaluation. Key products include the statements of work to solicit proposals for the demonstration and evaluation.

Assessment of Puerto Rico Nutrition Assistance Program: The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 provides funds to study the feasibility and effects of including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. For more than 20 years, the Commonwealth has operated the Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP), under a block grant, as an alternative to the Food Stamp Program. The study is to include an assessment of the administrative, financial management, and other changes that would be necessary to establish a comparable supplemental nutrition assistance program, an estimate of the impact on Federal and Commonwealth benefit and administrative costs, an assessment of the impact on low-income residents of Puerto Rico, and other issues considered appropriate.

Assessment of Express SNAP: The role of community organizations for SNAP outreach and application assistance continues to grow. Illinois is now demonstrating the feasibility of expediting the application process by allowing households to apply for program benefits at food banks and be certified for up to six weeks under relaxed verification requirements. At the end of this period each household either meets the standard information requirements or leaves SNAP. The goal is to bring eligible households into the program who would not otherwise participate. Other States have expressed interest in pursuing such projects.

While the available data suggest that the Illinois project is successful in addressing its participation goals, it is not conclusive. At the same time, payment errors that occur during the initial six weeks exceed national standards. The proposed study would use a stronger research design to compare participation and payment accuracy outcomes of alternative approaches, including applications taken at food banks with and without relaxed verification, and in SNAP office following usual procedures.

Evaluation of SNAP Nutrition Education Practices: Although there has been substantial progress in focusing and improving food stamp nutrition education policies, FNS is constrained by the lack of clear evidence of its effectiveness. This is reflected in the recent PART review that concluded results have not been demonstrated for food stamp nutrition education. In FY 2008, FNS will award a contract to assess a small number of projects (four at most) with respect to their success in implementing the *Guiding Principles for Food Stamp Nutrition Education*, impacts on nutrition-related behaviors, and cost-effectiveness. Results would provide a set of best practices and models for both nutrition education and evaluation. FY 2009 funding will be used to increase the number of projects and sites in the assessment. Given the large number and wide variety of nutrition education initiatives, this study would add measurably to the Agency's ability to identify best practices.

Pilot Test of Performance Standards and Reporting for Modernization: Many States are pursuing a range of policy, organizational and technology changes to food stamp application, certification and case management. To date, FNS has developed monitoring procedures and reporting requirements on a case-by case basis. This allows the Agency to target resources

where most needed but also leaves some gaps and inconsistencies in the Agency's understanding of performance. The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 calls for States pursuing major changes in program design to provide information as required by USDA. FNS is launching a study in FY 2008 to identify and prioritize a set of performance standards. The proposed FY 2009 project will pilot test these standards and reporting tools. This will enable the Agency to establish requirements that are both meaningful and feasible, as well as to provide guidance that facilitates consistent feedback across States and over time.

Participation among the Elderly and Working Poor: Expanding program access for these two key underserved populations is an area of critical importance for FNS. This project will build on the promise of prior research – which demonstrated the feasibility of increasing participation in a few small sites – by testing a wider range of approaches on a larger scale to identify what works.

Updated Estimate of Retailer Trafficking: This project will update estimates of the extent of trafficking – the exchange of food benefits for cash – using the results of undercover investigations and EBT-based administrative case actions against retailers suspected of trafficking. FNS has previously released estimates for 1993, 1996-1998, 1999-2002, and 2003-2005. This update will cover the period 2006-2008.

Child Nutrition Programs

Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) Evaluation: The Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 provides for expansion of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and requires an evaluation including a determination as to whether children (a) experienced, as a result of participating in the program, increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and (b) made other dietary changes, such as decreased consumption of less nutritious foods. Funding for the evaluation, not subject to further appropriations, is provided in the law. The evaluation is to be completed by September 30, 2011.

School Food Purchase Study III: The Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 requires the Secretary to carry out a nationally representative survey of the foods purchased by school food authorities participating in the National School Lunch Program. Similar to the previous two studies, it would provide national estimates of the type, volume, and dollar value of food acquired by public school districts participating in NSLP. It will provide insight into the importance of USDA commodity donations as a primary source of certain food items. Analysis of shifts in the type and mix of foods acquired compared to the previous study will be conducted. The study will also examine school district food purchase practices including examination of the assessment fees for storage and delivery of USDA donated commodities charged to the school districts.

Using the American Community Survey for NSLP Claiming Rates: There is significant interest in alternative methods of developing claiming rates for reimbursement in the NSLP and SBP that are less burdensome to school districts than the customary method of applications. This study would commission the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) of the National Academies to examine the potential strengths and limitations of using data from the American Community Survey (ACS) or other data sources to establish small area estimates (school

district/school) of the percentage of households with school-aged children below the eligibility thresholds for free and reduced-price meals.

School Meals Verification Data Cleaning and Database: The 2008 Farm Bill requires FNS to submit an annual report to Congress on State effectiveness with direct certification. To date, the burdensome work of reviewing and cleaning the data provided by school food authorities on Form FNS-742 (School Food Authority Verification Summary Report) has been done by staff at FNS. This project would provide for contractor assistance in reviewing the forms, obtaining corrected versions when needed, performing edit checks and imputations, and creating a clean database for in-house analysis and preparation of the next annual report.

Error Prone Profile of NSLP Certification Errors: Given the results of the recent APEC Study, there is significant interest in identifying characteristics of school districts that have a higher probability of making certification errors. Exploration of various data sets including APEC, RORA, and the Verification Summary Report data would be used to develop an error prone model.

Predictors of DRI Achievement: This item will determine aspects of meal offerings and other factors amenable to modification that predict selection of nutritious meals and consumption of nutritious diets by NSLP participants. This information would assist FNS in providing more effective technical assistance to schools, promoting conformance with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. It will be based on analysis of the SNDA-III data. The task is an option in the SNDA-IV contract.

WIC Program

WIC Special Project Grants: Since 1995, the annual WIC appropriation has provided funding for grants to WIC State agencies to develop, implement, and evaluate new or innovative methods of WIC service delivery to meet the changing needs of participants. As part of the effort, State WIC personnel and their consulting social scientists, meet annually to share information and exchange ideas on how to improve the value of the projects to States at large. In 2009, the Agency anticipates a focus on strengthening WIC clinicians' nutrition assessment skills and on assessing the impacts of upcoming changes in WIC food packages.

State Food Package Policy Study: The interim final rule updating the WIC food packages must be implemented by State WIC agencies by October 2009. Implementation requires a complex set of policy decisions by each State regarding specific foods, food brands and package sizes, vendor minimum stock requirements, and other administrative choices available to the States under the rule. This study would describe the variety of State choices and provide operational information useful in developing the final rule.

Participant Characteristics (PC) Data Alternatives: In 1988, FNS negotiated with the State WIC agencies and CDC agreement on a minimum data set and supplemental data set for routine biennial reporting. The minimum data set, which was largely based on the lowest common denominator of information available in WIC systems in the later 1980s, with minor subsequent modification to enhance information on breastfeeding, remains the basis for biennial WIC

participant characteristics reporting over 20 years later. Since the time of development of the minimum data set, computer technology has advanced considerably and most WIC systems have been replaced, providing State and local agencies with improved access to a broader range of data useful in program management. In addition, the CDC Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System (PedNSS) and Pregnancy Nutrition Surveillance System (PNSS), which helped shape the original WIC minimum data set have been updated. This project would provide contracted support for work with CDC and the State WIC agencies to explore the potential for replacement of the current biennial WIC-PC reporting with an alternative that would provide better, more useful data and reporting in a more timely fashion.

Cross-Program

Development and Testing of Supporting Content for Core Nutrition Messages: The purpose of this project is to develop and test supporting content related to core messages for mothers of preschool kids and elementary age kids. Supporting content for these messages would increase their usability and facilitate implementation by FNS programs. Supporting content would include actionable tips and “emotional hooks” to motivate moms to put division of feeding responsibility messages into action. Supporting content would also be provided for elementary-school kids to support the messages targeting fruits and vegetables and low-fat/fat-free milk consumption. Supporting content for kids would include tips, strategies, and visual images that provide additional skill-building information to assist the reader in making eating behavior changes.

Food and Nutrition Information Center: Funds will support the Food and Nutrition Information Center within the National Agricultural Library to systematically store and disseminate information on USDA’s food assistance programs, nutrition education, and related nutrition topics.