

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2011**

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(Note: Projects described in this plan are subject to available funds, and may change without notice)

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

FNCS Priority: End Childhood Hunger by 2015

Evaluation of Summer Food for Children Demonstrations: The FY 2010 Agriculture Appropriation Act provided \$85 million to carry out demonstration projects to develop and test methods of providing access to food for children in urban and rural areas during the summer months when schools are not in regular session, and rigorously evaluate their impact on children's food insecurity, hunger, and nutritional status. This project will collect and analyze information from randomly assigned samples of participating and non-participating children in demonstration communities on food security, food choices, and related information, as well as a wide range of information on implementation and performance of the demonstration operations.

Understanding Childhood Hunger – Implications for Nutrition Assistance: Reducing or eliminating childhood hunger requires a more complete understanding of why children go hungry. Building on a project started in FY 2010 to create a center for child hunger research, these funds will support a second round of competitively awarded grants to identify the circumstances and coping strategies of low-income families with food insecure children. This research will contribute to a better understanding of who is at risk of hunger and how nutrition assistance and other programs can address that risk. This follow-on also provides a vehicle to address more specific questions regarding the ways families meet food needs when they leave SNAP, the combination of household characteristics associated with a higher probability of food insecurity, and circumstances that contribute to food insecurity experienced by families above the income thresholds that make them ineligible for most nutrition assistance programs.

Zero-income SNAP Households: While zero-income families make up nearly 20 percent of the SNAP caseload, there is limited information about their characteristics, their circumstances and the extent these change from month-to-month, and their patterns of benefit redemption. An ongoing project will begin to fill some gaps by examining the characteristics of these households using the most recent Quality Control (QC) data. The proposed study will seek to better understand these factors by examining multiple years of administrative (Quality Control, EBT transactions) and national survey data to look at participation patterns of zero-income households at different points in time.

Adequacy of Food Resources and SNAP Allotments: SNAP benefits are intended to alleviate food insecurity, improve diet quality and generally relieve poverty by freeing up family resources to meet other basic needs. Monthly allotments are based, in part, on the cost of a minimal-cost nutritious diet (the Thrifty Food Plan). Many question the adequacy of SNAP benefits, citing food preparation requirements, cultural food preferences, food access constraints and other challenges that make current benefits insufficient and propose various increases. This project will convene a workshop, under the auspices of the National Academies, to explore the potential and feasibility of establishing an objective, evidence-based, science-driven definition of benefit adequacy. The workshop will surface issues relevant to defining benefit adequacy, identify data requirements and research approaches necessary to establish an operational

definition of adequacy and to support an empirical comparison to SNAP benefit levels, and suggest strategies to meet any information needs.

Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: Report to Congress: Under direct certification, children are determined eligible for free school meals without the need for household applications by using data from other means-tested programs. The law requires local educational agencies to conduct direct certification for children from households that receive SNAP benefits, as well as annual reporting to Congress on the effectiveness of State and local efforts to directly certify children for free school meals. This project will analyze nutrition assistance program administrative data, compile information on best practices, and prepare the annual report to Congress for SY 2010-11.

FNCS Priority: Develop a Comprehensive National Effort to Reduce Obesity

USDA's Healthy Community Program: This project, if funds are appropriated, will test the impact and cost-effectiveness of integrating multiple levels of communication and influence at the community level to encourage healthy eating among SNAP recipients. Community-based interventions are now being used to advance a wide range of public health objectives. This project will investigate the effectiveness of this approach to raise awareness of healthy eating, shift social norms, create and facilitate opportunities to improve food choices, and reward such choices when made. Funds would cover both demonstration and evaluation costs.

National WIC Food and Nutrition Study: This study will determine WIC's impacts on the food security, food purchases and dietary behaviors and intake of women and children participants, and identify relationships between these impacts and duration of participation, participant characteristics, and specific WIC benefits and services. Data will be collected from a cohort of participants at several points in time. Analysis would seek to correlate impacts with exposure to WIC nutrition education, specific WIC foods, household food spending, uptake of other services related to referral from WIC, as well as characteristics such as household composition, income, physical activity and other obesity-related factors. The study would also explore characteristics of local agency services and operations (staffing levels, VENA implementation, and integration with health services) in relation to client outcomes. Options will allow for a longer longitudinal assessment, and additional subsampling to explore questions related to infant and toddler feeding.

Healthy Incentives Pilot Evaluation – Nutrition Education Component: The Healthy Incentive Pilot is testing the impact of point-of-sale incentives on the purchase and consumption of fruit and vegetables by SNAP participants. It is possible that a financial incentive alone, absent an effort to explain the potential benefits of fruits and vegetables and encouragement to make the healthy choice, may prove insufficient to change participant behavior. These funds, if appropriated, will expand the pilot to combine a strong nutrition education component with the point-of sale incentive. The results will provide information to policy makers on whether or not adding nutrition education and promotion to a financial incentive has a greater impact on purchases and consumption than the incentive alone. Funds would cover both expanded demonstration and evaluation costs.

WIC Infant and Toddler Feeding Practices and Nutrition Education: This longitudinal study will provide updated information on the feeding patterns of WIC infants, with expanded information on infant and toddler feeding behaviors. It will also examine the nutrition education and breastfeeding promotion and support provided by WIC and other sources to determine the relative effectiveness of different approaches in achieving appropriate feeding patterns and behaviors. One objective of the study is to identify aspects of WIC nutrition education that could influence feeding practices to address the problem of high body weight among young children in WIC – most of whom have participated in WIC since early infancy. The base contract would fund the design, sampling and first year data collection; options would allow for data collection in future years, contingent upon availability of funding.

Center for Collaborative Research on WIC Nutrition Education Innovations: This project would establish a university-based center to design, implement and evaluate innovative WIC-based interventions to improve nutrition behaviors to prevent and address childhood obesity. Key issues to be explored include identification of effective models of nutrition education to change behavior, more effective uses of technology to achieve desired outcomes, and advances in communication and coordination among WIC, physicians and child care providers to improve target behaviors. The Center would direct a program of grants to support researcher-initiated projects that use a common approach to reporting findings to ensure transparency and facilitate a meta-analysis of all projects. The Center would work cooperatively with FNS to select sub-grantees and disseminate findings.

Foods Typically Purchased with SNAP Benefits: All available evidence indicates that the diets and food choices of most Americans are less than ideal, and that the diets and food choices of low-income individuals are most striking in their similarity rather than their differences with higher income individuals. Yet concern is frequently expressed that SNAP benefits are spent on unhealthy foods. Available data don't directly answer the question of what SNAP recipients buy with their benefits. This study will identify and compare the feasibility of using alternative food purchase data – from large store chains, loyalty card companies and other commercial sources that offer nationally representative information. One or more of these extant data bases will be examined to estimate the proportion of SNAP benefits spent on different foods. If store sales and EBT transaction data can be linked at the household level, purchase patterns can be examined by benefit amount. The feasibility of obtaining and analyzing data on foods purchased by WIC clients can also be explored. Information obtained from this study can inform policy, nutrition education and environmental initiatives to enhance the food choices of SNAP participants.

Understanding the Relationship between Food Insecurity and Obesity: The Institute of Medicine will conduct a workshop in Fall 2010 to assess the current evidence base on the relationship between food insecurity and obesity and identify the data, methods, and research needed to advance our understanding of this complex relationship. These funds will support one or more high priority follow-on research projects identified at the IOM workshop. Identification of the underlying mechanisms responsible for the coexistence of food insecurity and obesity is needed to determine how nutrition assistance programs can address both problems.

Assessment of WIC Impacts on Periconceptional Nutrition: During the periconceptional period—the time period immediately prior to conception and in the first few days and weeks following conception—nutrition can impact placental and embryonic development with critical lifelong implications. This project would support a university-based grant program for researcher-initiated projects to demonstrate creative approaches to evaluate WIC impacts on periconceptional nutrition, coordinate activities among researchers, and widely disseminate findings. Building on these efforts, the university and the sub-grantees would provide FNS with recommendations for cost-neutral approaches to improving WIC’s impact on periconceptional nutrition and an estimate of the cost-benefit associated with these impacts.

Potential Uses of the National Children’s Study: The National Children’s Study – led by DHHS and the Environmental Protection Agency – will examine the effects of environmental, biological, genetic, and psychosocial influences on the health and development of 100,000 children across the United States, following them from before birth until age 21. This project will explore the potential use of the Study to address critical WIC program research questions, by commissioning experts to develop descriptive papers that 1) identify information planned for collection through the Study that could be helpful in assessing WIC impacts and improving policy and operations, 2) delineate data limitations, and potential steps to minimize their impact, and 3) identify questions that could feasibly be added to the Study to further enhance its value to WIC and other FNS programs.

FNCS Priority: Provide Healthier Food in Schools and Child Care Centers

Putting Behavioral Economics to Work in School Cafeterias: These funds support a multi-year, integrated research program, launched in FY 2010 in collaboration with the Economic Research Service and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture, to develop, test, and promote applications of behavioral economic theory in the school nutrition environment. The goal is to identify, develop, and document evidence-based strategies, tools, and techniques that schools can use to shape their environments to support and encourage healthful food choices and behaviors. Planned activities, which will be finalized in consultation with ERS and NIFA, may include:

- planning grants to enable conceptual development of real-world applications of behavioral economic theory in the school nutrition environment and build links between the research community, school food service, and competitive food operations;
- small-scale pilot tests to validate the feasibility of potentially promising applications;
- large scale replications of promising results in multiple sites and among multiple populations to determine their generalizability; and
- dissemination, promotion, and training strategies to push the most promising practices to scale throughout America’s schools.

Simplified Tools to Assess School Meal Content: School Meals Initiative (SMI) reviews of local SFAs by State personnel currently require nutrient analysis, and are considered burdensome by some State and local program administrators and operators. This project will use data from the School Nutrition Dietary Assessments and other sources to develop, test and compare at least two alternate methods for review of local menus and practices to identify a more efficient and effective set of review tools and a classification system that could be used to determine

performance-based payments following implementation of the meal pattern and nutrition standard changes recommended by the Institute of Medicine.

Analytical Support for School Nutrition Standards Update: FNS is collecting data for the fourth School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA) under an existing contract. This funding will support special analyses of the SNDA-IV data to address emerging issues not covered by the basic analysis inherent in the study. This information will be useful in responding to the public comments to the proposed NSLP/SBP meal pattern and nutrition standard changes based on recommendations from the Institute of Medicine.

FNCS Priority: Expand the Farm-Food Connection in FNS Programs

Nutrition Assistance Client Shopping Patterns at Farmers' Markets: This study will focus on SNAP and WIC clients use of farmers' markets to redeem benefits, to better understand who does and does not use farmers' markets and why, what foods they purchase there, and how such markets fit into their overall food shopping. There will be at least two components of the project: an analysis of EBT transaction data and WIC voucher redemptions and a survey of SNAP and WIC participants (including some who do and some who do not shop at farmers markets). The project complements a current survey of market managers about operations, features of markets that participate in FNS programs compared to those that do not, perceived barriers to program participation, and successful resolution.

Relative Value of Farmers' Market Financial Incentives and Promotional Messages: In recent years, a wide variety of incentive programs, which allow SNAP and WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program participants to receive additional purchasing power for fruits and vegetables at local farmers' markets, have been launched or expanded significantly as a means of increasing access to and consumption of local fresh produce. More generally, questions remain as to the relative impact of incentives, nutrition promotion, or the two implemented together in promoting healthful food choices. This study would examine the relative effectiveness of financial incentives and nutrition promotion in encouraging healthy food purchases and SNAP redemptions at farmers' markets. The demonstration would assign SNAP households to different information and incentive conditions, and the evaluation would examine EBT redemption data to assess differences in the frequency and amount of spending at farmers markets. Funds will cover both demonstration and evaluation costs.

FNCS Priority: Continue Modernizing FNS Programs

Understanding the Causes and Costs of SNAP Churning: To varying degrees, all States experience churning in the SNAP caseload, the phenomenon in which participating households leave the program at recertification (or some other point) and then return within a short time. Improving retention would increase participation (possibly in a manner more cost-effective than outreach) and may reduce some administrative costs. Using interview data and administrative records, this study will examine the prevalence and reasons for churning, along with the marginal administrative costs of processing an application compared to a recertification through a set of case studies in selected States. Information on practices used to improve retention also will be collected to help identify best practices.

Roles and Effectiveness of Community-based Organizations in SNAP: Community-based organizations (CBOs) play an increasingly important role in supporting SNAP outreach and applications. As the eligible SNAP population grows and State resources for program administration decline, CBOs have acquired new functions to facilitate SNAP participation. One of the most important new roles is the responsibility for conducting interviews with SNAP applicants. The variety among CBOs with respect to whom they serve, how they provide SNAP-related services, and the nature of their relationships with local SNAP agencies is considerable. The initial phase of this study is to carry out a set of evaluations in several States conducting applicant interviews under FNS waiver authority. Data would be collected from both waived areas and comparison sites within each State to compare application activity, participation, payment accuracy and client satisfaction. In addition, interviews would be conducted with program staff and CBOs to systematically describe implementation and operational procedures.

Alternatives to SNAP Certification Interviews: This project will test alternative approaches to the client interview when certifying applicants for SNAP benefits in 3 to 6 competitively selected States. FNS awarded a contract in FY 2010 to conduct a rigorous evaluation the impact of the alternatives on client satisfaction, payment accuracy, and administrative cost. FY 2011 funds will be used to support demonstration operations in the selected sites.

WIC Research Information Network: This project would build on USDA's web-based *WIC Works Resource System* web site with a new module designed to meet the needs of the WIC research community. The WIC Research Information Network would provide a comprehensive catalogue and annotated bibliography of WIC studies and funding opportunities, a data base of study design documents and questionnaires, and a data base of topic-specific executive summaries of research findings for use by program managers, policy officials and the public. The Network would also develop and routinely disseminate through the web a monthly executive summary of new developments in WIC research, and support a web-based social network for researchers to facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration.

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.

SUPPORT FOR NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

Measures of Erroneous Payments in School Meal Programs: This study, if funds are appropriated, will collect and analyze nationally representative data on certification, meal counting and claiming, and participation during SY 2012-13 to prepare updated estimates of payment errors in the school meals programs, in support of the requirements of the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002. It will replicate the methodology of a study conducted for SY 2005-06, and thus provide a basis to assess changes in the level of erroneous payments in the school meals programs. It would also provide an updated baseline for annual required projections of erroneous payments.

Cost of Producing Reimbursable School Meals: The level of Federal reimbursement for school meals affects the ability of schools to serve nutritious, high quality food that children will eat. To ensure that decisions on reimbursement levels are informed by up-to-date, high quality information, FNS has examines meal costs every few years. This study – the third of its kind if funds are appropriated – will estimate the cost to produce a reimbursable school lunch and breakfast, and collect information on the revenue sources used to cover these costs, in SY 2012-13. It will use the same methodology used to collect this information in SY 2005-06 to enable meaningful comparisons of changes over time. In addition, this study will collect information on the nutritional quality of meals produced, enabling further analysis of the relationship between meal costs, reimbursements, and quality.

Assessment of WIC Vendor Management Practices: This project will replicate and update a study of WIC vendor management practices that collected data from a national sample of stores in 2004. These data touch on a variety of vendor topics. The study also provides the basis for annual estimates of WIC vendor erroneous payments required as part of compliance with the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (IPIA). This year's study will be expanded to measure the level of erroneous payments in WIC cash value vouchers (used for fruits and vegetables, implemented for the first time since this study was last conducted) and to develop and test a methodology for determining erroneous payments under WIC EBT, which has expanded considerably since the last study.

WIC Breastfeeding Data Improvement Demonstration Project: WIC agencies need better, faster data on a variety of measures in order to support continuous improvement of breastfeeding interventions. This project is a collaborative effort of USDA and HHS agencies, the National WIC Association, Breastfeeding Promotion Consortium, lead researchers and others to design and demonstrate improved systems for collecting and reporting breastfeeding data. It includes a review and assessment of data systems currently in use or under development, in order to build efficiently on existing efforts. Technical specifications from successful demonstrations would be integrated into future State WIC systems requirements.

Special Nutrition Programs Operations Study: In FY 2010, FNS awarded a contract for a multi-year panel study of select operational aspects of the school nutrition programs. FY 2011 funds will support a second year of core program operations data collection and analysis, covering a wide range of descriptive information about the operation of school meals programs

at the State and school district levels needed to inform program management and the development of national policies, and supporting a web-based quick-response survey capability that will allow FNS to query program operating agencies on specific descriptive items that require little or no lookup on their part. In addition, this will fund on-site data collections to provide descriptive information on nutrition education in schools, the use of behavioral economic concepts in the school food environment, the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, and other SFA and school practices (such as food safety procedures).

Measuring Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation): This on-going project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address program participation trends and impacts; generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates and patterns of SNAP participation; and supports the Agency's capacity to assess cost and distributional impacts of proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs. A new contract will be awarded in FY 2011.

Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) Participant and Program Characteristics: The proposed study would examine and attempt to explain the recent decline in FDPIR participation. In addition, the project would describe FDPIR participants with respect to their demographic characteristics; access to and use of other nutrition assistance programs; access to food stores and facilities for storing and preparing food; and program operations, including food package dissemination and nutrition education. Information for this descriptive study would come from program records, interviews with program staff, program managers, participants and non-participants. The study could be expanded in future years to examine food use, dietary intake and food waste in FDPIR participating households.

WIC Local Agency Breastfeeding Policy Inventory: This project would support development of a set of data collection instruments to support a descriptive census of local agency breastfeeding-related policies, linked to breastfeeding rates. The instruments, developed in coordination with the WIC Breastfeeding Data Improvement Project, would be designed as a core questionnaire to assess change over time combined with modules for emerging interests. The project includes an initial data collection and report that will examine the relationship of local policies to the known profound geographic variation in breastfeeding rates.

Analytical Support for SNAP Policy Development: This project addresses a variety of specific SNAP or methodological questions useful to program managers that do not require the use of the microsimulation model. Among the tasks to be considered in 2011 are: a research review of the extent and nature of under reporting of nutrition assistance program participation in national surveys; a comparison of racial and ethnic data on program participants from administrative and national survey data; basic guidance targeted to help FNS grantees who are assessing the outcomes of participation, access or other projects; preparation of a public, searchable data base for State SNAP-Ed evaluations; description of SNAP benefit use at authorized restaurants; and participation of ABAWDs before and after ARRA.

WIC Participant and Program Characteristics: Information about WIC participation characteristics has been prepared biennially since 1992 from administrative records provided by State agencies. It provides detailed information on the demographic characteristics, economic

circumstances and health conditions of WIC clients, along with information on the operational characteristics of State and local WIC agencies. This project will support preparation of WIC PC reports for 2012 and 2014, and updates and improvements of the collection and reporting of WIC characteristics data.

State and Local School Meal Program Procurement Practices: This module of the Special Nutrition Program Operations Study would provide national information about State and local school meal program procurement practices. Topics for inquiry may include the use and specific level of small purchase thresholds, the use of various procurement vehicles, and the use and content of model contracts for food service management companies, food distributors, food item specifications, menu planning support, warehousing.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Tiering Error Measurements: The Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (IPIA) requires agencies to produce annual measures of erroneous payments in Federal programs subject to risk. For the CACFP, FNS has met this requirement through studies of errors child care sponsoring organizations make when assigning family day care home providers to higher or lower reimbursement tiers. This item provides funding for the 2011 measure.

WIC Food Cost Assessment Report: This project will analyze data from the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics data sets, other FNS administrative data, and food cost data to prepare a report on WIC food cost by category and commodity. The report will include both the pre-rebate and post-rebate costs for the various categories of WIC foods (milk, cheese, eggs, cereal, etc.). The information is useful in understanding and forecasting the impact of food costs on WIC program costs.

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

WIC Vendor Management Practices Data Aging: This item funds the annual aging of data on WIC vendor erroneous payments for reporting in the USDA Performance and Accountability Report (PAR). It helps fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Accountability Act of 2002. Using a statistical procedure called “raking”, data from the bookend study of WIC vendor payments in 2004-2005 are adjusted using administrative data reported by States and maintained in the Integrity Profile (TIP) database. The TIP database includes reports of findings from the required covert compliance purchases at WIC vendors conducted on an ongoing basis by State WIC agencies. Annual aging of the data from the 2004-2005 study will be needed until results from the new study (described above) are available.

WIC Eligibles Estimates - National and State: This item would fund the FY 2011 option for annual estimates of the number of individuals eligible for the WIC Program. These estimates are used to help allocate funding in the WIC funding formula, and track the national WIC coverage rate.

Regional Office Review of Applications: This project will review the national sample of NSLP applications collected annually by FNS regional offices to determine the extent of administrative error incurred during local educational agencies approval process of applications for free and reduced-price meals in the National School Lunch Program. These administrative error rates are reported to comply with the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002. The information captured reflects the accuracy of local determinations of household size and gross monthly income and meal price status based on the information provided on applications.