



Program Integrity

Why is integrity a priority for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS)?

Stewardship of Federal funds is a basic expectation of American taxpayers and is critical to the ongoing success of nutrition assistance programs. FNS continuously works to detect, prevent, and minimize errors and improper payments, as well as fraud, waste, or abuse. In this way, FNS preserves public trust, enhances partner relationships, and provides excellent customer service to program participants.

How does FNS ensure integrity in its programs?

To maximize effectiveness, integrity efforts require ongoing vigilance and a multipronged strategy. To keep these efforts robust and up to date with emerging problems and threats, FNS uses:

- Training to increase State agency and partner skills and knowledge in the administration of nutrition assistance programs and recent updated training for its own staff to ensure effective oversight.
- Technical assistance to clarify, expand, explain, or provide support to program operators.
- Technology to prevent and detect fraudulent activities, including data analytics, trend analysis and business process improvement strategies. Systems are used to track and monitor State administration of Agency programs and retailer activities.
- Management Evaluations conducted every year of State agencies administering the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs; Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

What program integrity measures has FNS recently instituted or improved?

Though integrity has long been a key responsibility under the law, FNS has more recently developed or enhanced the

following innovative strategies to anticipate and respond to new program risks:

SNAP Fraud Framework

Released in May 2018, the Framework is a toolkit designed to help State agencies detect and prevent fraud and to sharpen their investigative techniques. Based on an initial partnership with 10 State agencies, the Framework was developed as a collection of flexible tools including innovations in data analytics that will help States' efforts in supporting program integrity. In 2019, FNS expects to award SNAP Fraud Framework Implementation Grants to State agencies enabling them to improve and expand recipient fraud prevention, detection, and investigation efforts based on the practices in the toolkit.

SNAP Quality Control Error Rate Modernization

After identifying data quality issues that impacted FNS' ability to properly identify error in the calculation of SNAP benefits, FNS undertook a process to improve error rate calculations. This included revising instructions to States, enhanced training for State and Federal reviewers, and a more pronounced attention to data quality in general. The error rates for Fiscal Year 2017, released in June 2018, were the first rates announced since these reforms were implemented.

SNAP Retailer Integrity

FNS is directly responsible for the authorization and monitoring of more than 250,000 participating SNAP retailers. Program compliance for SNAP retailers begins at the application phase. At this time, FNS collects and analyzes information to identify potentially fraudulent retailers before they are SNAP authorized. FNS uses a fraud detection system to monitor and track retail transactions by SNAP recipients at authorized retailers. The system creates an audit trail of approximately 6 million daily SNAP transactions, allowing FNS to use analytics to detect behavior indicative of fraud and to support FNS decisions related to ensuring retailer compliance and program integrity. The system is continually enhanced to improve FNS' ability to prevent and detect fraud.

PROGRAM INTEGRITY

Focal Point

To ensure that integrity lessons are shared across programs and to provide a focal point for integrity at the highest level of the Agency, FNS designated a Chief Integrity Officer.

Technology Supporting School Programs

FNS implemented a suite of technology-based tools that support schools including:

- The Verification Toolkit which provides schools with the resources and strategies to streamline the school meal application verification process, improve household response rates, and achieve greater accuracy in serving meals to eligible children.
- A Database of Professional Standards Trainings and Professional Standards Training Tracker Tool 2.0. This tool provides school nutrition professionals with over 500 options for training on improving preparation, service, counting, and claiming of school meals.

- A Web-based Application Model that allows school districts and their software vendors to use its open-source code to design their own user-friendly, integrity-focused school meal applications. The application's open source code is available for re-use, modification, and further development by State agencies, school districts, and software developers.
- A Data Validation Service prototype cloud-based option designed to lessen the burden of administrative data validation on State agencies while increasing the value of program data for agency research.

Partnership with the USDA Office of Inspector General (OIG)

FNS and USDA's OIG each play critical roles in protecting program integrity. OIG conducts investigations of criminal wrongdoing while SNAP takes expeditious administrative actions to remove violators and prevent misuse of benefits. FNS and OIG recently collaborated on an updated Memorandum of Understanding clarifying responsibilities for investigations with the goal of more expeditiously addressing suspected program violations.