

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2012**

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

***FNCS Priority: Improve Program Access and Reduce Hunger***

**Evaluation of Direct Certification with Medicaid**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 directs USDA to demonstrate and evaluate the use of direct certification for free school meals for children who receive Medicaid. The purpose of the evaluation is to determine the potential of direct certification with Medicaid to reach children who are eligible but not certified for free meals or who were certified on the basis of a paper application. It will also provide an estimate of the effect on Federal costs and on participation in the school meal programs.

**Research Grants to Improve Understanding of Childhood Hunger**

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 (at the University of Kentucky's Center for Poverty Research), these funds will support a third 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.

**Impact of the Affordable Care Act on SNAP**

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) will change how States administer human service programs by expanding Medicaid eligibility and streamlining the enrollment process. Newly eligible people entering the system seeking health insurance may increase the number of SNAP applications, especially in States with joint administration or combined applications for Medicaid and SNAP. This project will use case studies of six to eight states to examine how implementation of ACA effects the coordination of Medicaid and SNAP, describe the process for directing Medicaid applicants to SNAP, and determine how it impacts the number of SNAP applications. The study will assess the effectiveness of different administrative models, report lessons learned, and discuss opportunities for better coordination of the two programs.

**Assessing SNAP Outreach Strategies**

SNAP invests in a variety of outreach and application assistance efforts through community based organizations to increase participation among underserved, eligible households. Building upon preliminary work done by ERS, this project will develop an evaluation data repository to gather and centralize data on the collective inputs and results of outreach activities from which data driven models can be constructed and explored to determine the efficacy of various frequently used strategies, including multi-program application assistance initiatives, out-stationed eligibility workers, previously funded SNAP Outreach Grants, the Feeding America SNAP Outreach initiatives, and the Share Our Strength No Kid Hungry campaigns.

### **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 2011-12.

### **Estimates of WIC Eligibles and Coverage**

This item would fund an option to develop the next in the series annual estimates of the number of individuals eligible for WIC and national and State coverage rates.

### ***FNCS Priority: Improve Nutrition and Reduce Obesity***

#### **School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study**

The National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program are designed to provide nutritionally balanced, low cost or free meals to children. With the implementation of new meal standards, there is considerable interest in research on the success of school meals meeting these new program goals, the cost of serving healthful meals that are attractive to children, and the relationship of school menus and competitive foods to children's participation and diets. This study would examine the relationships between school environment and school food service operations, nutritional quality of meals offered and served in the school meal programs, costs to produce reimbursable meals, and student participation, participant characteristics, satisfaction and related attitudes toward the school lunch and breakfast programs. Primary data collection would occur in SY 2014-15.

#### **Evaluation of WIC Nutrition Education**

Following publication of FNS' *WIC Nutrition Education Assessment* in 1999, GAO recommended that FNS develop a strategic plan to evaluate WIC nutrition education and conduct research on how best to "*evaluate the impacts of specific nutrition services as well as the data and the financial resources that would be needed to conduct such research.*" This study would replicate the 1999 study to provide an updated description of WIC nutrition education following the major changes in WIC food packages and breastfeeding activities, and use this information to design a study to evaluate the impact of WIC nutrition education on participant nutrition-related behaviors and outcomes.

#### **Center for Innovations in WIC Nutrition Education**

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.

### **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.

### **Capturing SNAP Purchases at the Point-of-Sale**

There is considerable interest in what households purchase with their SNAP benefits. The Anti-Fraud Locator for EBT Redemption Transaction (ALERT) system records each EBT transaction for each household. Each record includes the store identification number, household identifier, card number, date and time of transaction, transaction type and amount, and account balance. However, ALERT does not capture information on individual items purchased during a SNAP transaction. This project will develop a proof-of-concept demonstration that links EBT systems to electronic cash registers to capture, aggregate, and summarize the food purchase data. It will begin with conceptual development to identify system requirements; potential challenges and barriers to implementation (and options to mitigate each); and the scope and limitations of the data that could be collected (including absence of out-of-pocket expenses of SNAP recipients and purchases by non-SNAP participants). If deemed feasible, the project will support small scale demonstrations with selected retailers in one or two States or communities.

### **Database Development to Describe SNAP Purchases**

One of the challenges faced when trying to describe the food purchases of SNAP participants is the sheer number of food items available for purchase. According to the Food Marketing Institute, the average supermarket carried nearly 39,000 items in 2010. It can be hard to create useful summary information when it is important sometimes to preserve distinctions in form or package size or other characteristic and sometimes it is not. Chicken, for example, may be fresh, frozen, or canned; whole or parts; with or without its skin. This project will build on existing efforts (such as the Food and Nutrient Database for Dietary Studies) to develop alternatives or solutions for a flexible data base structure to code and aggregate food purchase data from a variety of sources. The data base structure should be applicable across point-of-sale and survey data sources to respond to queries about real-time or historical data on SNAP purchases.

### **Creating Incentives for Healthy Choices**

This study will develop concepts for promoting healthier food purchases by SNAP clients by structuring purchase incentives based on selected dietary, food, or nutrient-based scoring systems. Recognizing that there is no generally accepted scoring or labeling system, this project will identify current or potential alternatives (including the total diet recommendations of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*); assess their merits and limitations (including their ability to include unprocessed or other foods without front-of-pack labels); determine how to translate such dietary recommendations, scores or labels into incentives at the point of purchase; and address the feasibility of implementation and likelihood of promoting healthier purchases.

Incentives could be tailored to increase purchasing power (so that, for example, a dollar of SNAP benefits buys two units of a healthy choice but only 1 unit of a less healthy choice) or to provide a discount on selected items, within the current value of the monthly SNAP allotment.

### **Profile of American Consumption and Diet Quality**

All of the major Federal nutrition assistance programs include improved nutrition among their goals. A critical research question when studying the effectiveness of these programs, therefore, is the relationship between program participation and dietary outcomes. This project will address what low-income Americans eat, compare their diets to accepted standards for healthy eating, and examine the relationship between program participation and dietary intake. It will build on the existing research by using the most current information from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey to compare the diets of SNAP, NSLP, and WIC participants to non-participants.

### **Simplified Tools to Assess School Meal Patterns and Nutrient Compliance**

This funding enhances the activity under an ongoing *project* develop and validate a promising component of the tool set—the Practices and Indicators Checklist (PIC). Newly available data from the latest School Nutrition Dietary Assessment (SNDA- IV) will be used to test and refine the PIC for easy application in potentially assessing compliance with school meal patterns and nutrition standards.

### **Bridging the Gap: School Wellness Policy Monitoring**

The National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR) has asked participating Federal agencies to contribute funding to continue an ongoing national system of monitoring of school wellness policies conducted by the University of Chicago. This system was established with seed funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and will require alternate funding to continue as the RWJF funding declines. The FNS funding would be contingent upon similar contributions from other Federal agencies to provide adequate total funding to continue the Bridging the Gap national report series.

### **Updated Guidebook for Core Nutrition Messages**

FNS will release in 2012 a second set of core messages that build on those released in 2008 by expanding their reach to encourage consumption of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and fat-free and low-fat milk and to promote healthy feeding practices for young children. They are intended to help nutrition educators deliver consistent and accurate messages that resonate with participants across nutrition assistance programs and support the development healthy eating patterns in low-income mothers and young children. This project will update an implementation guide to reflect the additional messages and supporting materials.

### **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.

## ***FNCS Priority: Improve Program Integrity and Reduce Improper Payments***

### **Measures of Erroneous Payments in School Meal Programs**

This study will collect and analyze nationally representative data on certification, meal counting and claiming, and participation during SY 2013-14 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 will also provide a refined set of estimation models and an updated baseline for annual required projections of erroneous payments. In addition, this project will examine the feasibility of alternative approaches to produce State-level estimates of erroneous payments.

### **Extent of SNAP Benefit Trafficking: 2009-2011**

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, 2003-2005, 2006-2008. This update will cover the period 2009-2011.

### **Enhancing Completion Rates for SNAP QC Reviews**

The number of incomplete QC reviews continues to increase, and it is possible that these cases represent a disproportionate share of error prone cases. Because such cases are not counted in the calculation of payment errors, the integrity of that process may be negatively affected, along with the representativeness of other caseload analyses. This project would conduct a systematic review of the case selection process, review steps and case features associated with incomplete QC reviews. The analysis would compare information across States with different levels of incompletes, estimate the value of payment error associated with incomplete reviews, and assess the need to adjust the current weighting procedures for incomplete cases.

### **Indicators of High Risk WIC Vendors**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act requires WIC to transition to EBT benefit delivery by 2020. The nature of vendor error, overcharging and fraud under EBT is fundamentally different from these activities under the traditional paper WIC food instrument. This study will explore opportunities for updating WIC vendor management practices to improve the prevention, detection, correction and reporting of unallowable vendor practices under EBT operation. It will draw heavily on experiences from fraud prevention-related activities of early WIC EBT adopters as well as SNAP EBT, credit and debit card processing, and other commercial and governmental forms of electronic payment and benefit delivery.

### **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 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 2012 annual measure.

### **Promising Practices for Reducing Recipient Redemption Fraud**

While observations of recipient redemption patterns are used to identify potential fraud and to target retailer investigations, disqualifications and prosecutions for some time, increasing attention is targeted at pursuing SNAP clients engaged in trafficking and other fraudulent redemption activities. This study would capture ideas or existing practices within the credit/debit card industry, law enforcement arena and other program environments that rely on available information technology to prevent, identify, or document such fraud efficiently with the intent of identifying practices or strategies applicable in the SNAP environment. A conference would be convened with representatives from a range of stakeholders including State staff and EBT processors, to identify ideas, tools, and techniques that could be implemented to identify and prevent redemption fraud by SNAP clients. The cost, operational feasibility, and potential consequences for SNAP clients will be addressed.

### **WIC Vendor and Certification Error 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 a 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 an ongoing study of vendor practices are available.

### **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.

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

### **Assessment of WIC Administrative Costs**

This study will provide a modern measure of the size and major contributors to WIC administrative costs and cost variation among States and local agencies, including indirect costs and cost containment practices. In recent years, some have raised concern with the apparently high percentage of administrative costs, and local program managers have voiced concern with increased indirect cost charges to program accounts. There have been a number of major changes in the 20 years since the last detailed study on this subject, including increased use of technology (e.g., desk-top computers and on-site preparation of benefit instruments), a doubling of WIC participation, growth of infant formula rebates and breastfeeding promotion and support activities, adoption of new WIC food packages, and the start of transition to EBT benefit delivery.

### **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.

### **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 2012 funds will support a third 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. This study could provide descriptive information on meal price equity, a la carte pricing, the level of State and local subsidies beyond Federal reimbursements, nutrition education in schools, the use of behavioral economics in the school food environment, and other SFA and school practices.

### **Analytical Support for Policy Development**

These blank purchase agreements provide for analysis of existing data sets to address a variety of specific program or methodological questions useful to program managers and to support development of cost estimates for legislative, budgetary and regulatory proposals. Separate agreements are in place for SNAP, CN, and WIC.

### **Development of State GIS Capacity**

This project will provide funds for one or more States to develop and apply a Geographic Information System (GIS) capacity to inform SNAP management and outreach efforts. The State's SNAP cases will serve as one data layer and will be combined with at least one other data layer such as, but not limited to, SNAP authorized retailers and/or estimates of SNAP eligibles in small geographic areas. This project will inform other States interested in developing an effective GIS capacity.

### **WIC Food Cost Analysis**

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, juice, cereal, infant formula). It will also provide updated estimates of the relative cost of the average food package by category of participant. The information is useful in understanding and forecasting the impact of food costs on WIC program costs.

### **WIC Funding Formula State Estimates**

This project will provide the CPS-based estimate historically used to allocate WIC funding among the State WIC Agencies. In addition it will provide similar estimates based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) and compare the numbers derived from these two national surveys to help determine the implications of switching to use of the newer ACS data.