

## EVALUATION OF THE 14 STATE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM PILOT PROJECT

Office of Research and Analysis

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### Background

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) was created to ensure that children in low-income areas could have access to nutritious meals during the summer months when school is not in session. During the school year about 15 million low-income children depend on the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and/or School Breakfast Program (SBP) for nutritious free or reduced-price meals. However, during the summer months, only about 2 million children in low-income areas receive free meals provided by the SFSP.

In December 2000, the Secretary of Agriculture was authorized, through the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), to conduct a Pilot to increase SFSP participation in a number of States with low rates of feeding low-income children in the summer. States were eligible to participate in the Pilot if the proportion of low-income children they served in July 1999 through SFSP and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) relative to March 1999 NSLP participation was below 50 percent of the national average. Fourteen States, including Alaska, Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, Texas, and Wyoming, met the criteria and are participating in the Pilot. For the purpose of this Pilot, Puerto Rico is defined as a State. This 3-year Pilot began in fiscal year 2001 and has been extended until June 30, 2004. Under the Pilot, meals served by eligible sponsors in the 14 States are reimbursed at the maximum allowable rate. In addition, administrative record keeping for the Pilot sponsors was reduced since they were no longer required to record administrative and operating costs separately and they did not have to report costs to State Agencies.

As part of the current Child Nutrition Programs Reauthorization process, there is a proposal to extend the duration of the Pilot and expand it to include additional States by broadening the State eligibility criteria. This proposal would also expand the sponsor-eligibility to include all private non-profit sponsors. Under the 14 State Pilot, "eligible" sponsors include government sponsors, public and private nonprofit school food authority sponsors, public and private National Youth Sports Program sponsors, and public and private nonprofit residential camp sponsors. The current law specifically excludes all other private nonprofit organizations from participating in the Pilot.

### Objectives

The authorizing legislation required FNS to conduct an evaluation of the Pilot projects. The three main objectives of the evaluation are to describe the effects of the Pilot on: (1) participation by children and service institutions in the SFSP in the Pilot States; (2) the quality of meals and supplements served in the Pilot States; and (3) program integrity.

### Design and Methodology

Data for the evaluation were collected through a number of survey questionnaires administered in summer/fall 2002. Respondents included: 14 State Agencies responsible for the administration of the SFSP in the pilot States; 128 continuing SFSP sponsors that had participated in the SFSP prior to 2001; 111 SFSP sponsors new to the program in 2001 and 2002; and 77 former SFSP sponsors who had participated in SFSP prior to 2002 but were not participating in 2002. The survey data was augmented by administrative data obtained from the FNS National Data Bank. Analyses are descriptive in nature.

Of the three study objectives, FNS was able to examine, in detail, issues related to SFSP participation from the questionnaires completed by the State Agencies, and current and former sponsors in 2002 and from administrative data in the FNS National Data Bank. Findings related to meal quality and program integrity are based solely on the perceptions of the State Agencies and the sponsors who were surveyed in the 14 Pilot States.

## Findings

Key findings from the evaluation of the 14 Pilot States include:

### Participation

The evaluation of the impact of the "Pilot" on participation has been confounded by the availability of the Seamless Summer Feeding Waiver (SSFW) for school districts participating in summer feeding. Under SSFW, which began operating nationwide in 2002, participating school districts claim meals under the National School Lunch Program and not SFSP. Four of the 14 Pilot States also operated SSFW in 2003. In addition in 2002, FNS began a major national-level SFSP promotion initiative to increase SFSP access in 2003 and beyond. The impact of these other initiatives on participation and the impact of the Pilot on participation cannot be separated.

Total SFSP participation by sponsors and children increased during each of the first three years in the Pilot States. For the 14 States, combined SFSP sponsors increased by 18 percent and the Average Daily Attendance (ADA) by children increased by 43 percent from July 2000 to July 2003.

The impact on participation varied across the 14 States, with substantial increases found in some States, moderate increases in other States, and decreases found in a few States.

While the gap between the percentage of low-income children served by the 14 Pilot States and the percentage served by the other States decreased by 2 percentage points (12 percent)

from 16.9 percentage points in 2000 to 14.9 percentage points in 2003, many of the 14 Pilot States continue to be among the lowest in the nation in terms of the percentage of low-income children served during the summer.

### Program Expansion and Outreach

At least 80 percent of the 14 Pilot State Agencies felt that the pilot's reimbursement system helped to bring in new sponsors, retain current sponsors and increase the number of children served.

More than half of the 14 Pilot State Agencies reported in 2002 (2nd year of the Pilot) that they could support a 10 percent or more increase in SFSP sponsors with their existing staffing levels.

Most sponsors indicated an unwillingness to increase their number of SFSP sites in the future citing cost of operating sites and a perceived lack of demand for SFSP as reasons for not expanding.

Only a quarter of all sponsors indicated a willingness to increase their SFSP operating days.

### Barriers to Program Growth

Simplifying the cost accounting and application procedures does not appear to be the sole answer to increasing SFSP participation. There are other perceived barriers to SFSP expansion.

Both State Agencies and sponsors cited lack of transportation as a major barrier to increasing SFSP participation. State Agencies also cited not having enough sponsors, inadequate program publicity, and lack of community involvement as important reasons for low SFSP participation while sponsors cited lack of community involvement and insufficient funding as important barriers to increasing participation. Former sponsors also considered lack of transportation to be a major barrier to increasing SFSP participation.

## Meal Quality

A recent national study of the Summer Food Service Program indicated that on average SFSP meals are comparable to meals served in the National School Lunch Program. Most SFSP lunches typically served all the components needed to meet the SFSP meal pattern requirement.

No sponsor perceived a decline in meal quality or food safety as a result of the Pilot, while 21 percent believed that meal quality had improved and 25 percent believed food safety had improved.

## Program Integrity

State Agencies conduct sponsor and site monitoring visits and note any program deficiencies ranging from improper meal counting, to food safety to civil rights. Sponsors also monitor food service operations at their sites and take corrective actions as needed.

Based on perceptions of the State Agencies and sponsors, there was no indication that the Pilot had any adverse effect on program integrity.

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