

**FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
RESEARCH AND EVALUATION PLAN – FISCAL YEAR 2014**

**FEBRUARY 19, 2014**

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TO SAFE, NUTRITIOUS, AND BALANCED MEALS**

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*Please Note:* This plan is a forecast of projects FNS expects to pursue in Fiscal Year 2014, but is subject to modification without notice based on funding availability and program priorities.

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

**IMPROVE PROGRAM ACCESS AND REDUCE HUNGER**

**Demonstrations to End Childhood Hunger and Food Insecurity**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Section 141) authorized demonstrations to test innovative strategies – including alternative models for service delivery and benefit levels – to end child hunger and food insecurity. USDA is developing a solicitation for States and Indian tribal organizations to propose potential projects for competitive selection. The Department is required to conduct an independent evaluation of each demonstration using rigorous methods to measure the impact on participation, food security, nutrition, and associated behavioral outcomes. We will share results broadly to inform policy makers, service providers, other partners, and the public to promote wide use of successful strategies.

**Research on Causes, Characteristics, and Consequences of Childhood Hunger and Food Insecurity**

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 (Section 141) authorized a new research program on the causes, characteristics, and consequences of childhood hunger and food insecurity, with a focus on efforts to improve the knowledge base regarding contributing factors, geographic distribution, programmatic effectiveness, public health and medical costs, and consequences for child development, well-being, and educational attainment. USDA recently sponsored a Committee on National Statistics workshop to identify topic areas and research methods with the greatest potential. These ideas and other expert and stakeholder input will inform the Department's investment of these funds.

**Summer EBT for Children**

This project would use the remaining funds from the Summer Food for Children appropriation to extend the demonstration in existing sites and assess the effectiveness of benefit delivery. The project would provide EBT-based benefits in the summer of 2014 to the families of NSLP-free and reduced price certified children in a several counties in States participating in 2013. The evaluation would use administrative data from issuance, redemptions and school meals applications to determine the effectiveness of benefit delivery.

**Assess the Barriers that Constrain the Adequacy of SNAP Allotments**

The IOM committee report *SNAP: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy* recommended that FNS assess the individual, household, and the environmental factors that limit adequacy of the SNAP allotment. This study would develop and implement a new data collection to survey SNAP participants to determine these factors. The survey will include questions about cooking skills, shopping patterns, nutritional literacy, financial literacy, time available for preparing food, and other constraints.

**Child Nutrition Program Coordination in Rural Counties with Persistent Child Poverty**

Counties with persistently high levels of child poverty are likely to also experience significant food insecurity among children. For low income families with children, school meals and other child nutrition programs supplement household resources and SNAP benefits to provide access

to nutritious food. However, it is unclear whether these counties are using the programs as effectively as possible. This grant project would target two counties in each of the 15 States with the most counties with high child poverty. Grantees would assess eligibility for and participation in food and nutrition assistance, and the service integration and coordination of these programs with each other and other health and social services. Using a community involvement model, the grantee would work with representatives from each of these communities to identify barriers and facilitators to increasing access to Federally-funded and other food and nutrition assistance programs, and recommend improvements specific to each community.

### **Asset Limits and Their Impact on SNAP Participation and Financial Stability**

Evidence suggests that asset limits may prevent low-income families from maintaining resources to protect them from a financial shock or unanticipated expense. This study will examine whether asset limits (1) keep low-income families from participating in mainstream financial markets; (2) prevent low-income families from maintaining a buffer against major financial hits or other income shocks, and (3) contribute to longer SNAP spells due increased financial hardship related to a lack of assets. The first phase of the project will be a feasibility assessment to assess the appropriateness of available data sources and determine the best methodology for addressing the research questions. The second phase will carry out the study based on the results of the first phase.

### **Assessment of Tribal Administration of Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs**

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (Section 4004) provides funds for a study to determine the feasibility of Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) administering Federal nutrition assistance programs in lieu of State agencies or other administering entities. The study will determine which programs, services, functions, and activities it is feasible for ITOs to administer. The study will also determine whether statutory or regulatory changes would be necessary to allow for the change in administration.

### **Examination of Cash Nutrition Assistance Program Benefits in Puerto Rico**

Currently 25 percent of a household's allotment of Nutrition Assistance Program benefits in Puerto Rico is provided in the form of cash. The Agricultural Act of 2014 contains a provision (Section 4025) that over a 5-year period transitions the cash portion of the benefit to electronic benefit transfer by 2021. The Act also provides funds to carry out a review of the history, purpose, and usage of the cash portion of the benefit. The study is also to include an assessment of the potential adverse effects of discontinuation of cash benefits for both program participants and retailers.

### **Assessment of Nutrition Assistance Program Administration in the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands**

The Agricultural Act of 2014 (Section 4031) provides funds to assess the capabilities of CNMI to operate the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) in a similar manner to State agencies and to assess alternative models of SNAP operation and benefit delivery to best meet the nutrition assistance needs of CNMI. The study is to include assessments of CNMI's ability to fulfill the responsibilities of a State agency as defined in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 in regards to certifying eligible households, issuing benefits through electronic benefit transfer, maintaining program integrity including operation of a quality control system, implementing

work requirements including operation of an employment and training program, and paying a share of administrative costs with non-Federal funds.

## **IMPROVE NUTRITION AND REDUCE OBESITY**

### **Annual Assessment of Changes in Local Wellness Policies and Competitive Foods Practices**

Federal policymakers and child nutrition program managers need up-to-date information on changes in school local wellness policies and competitive foods practices. States, local education agencies, academic institutions and other stakeholders are interested in tracking such changes; a partnership in this effort has the potential to provide consistent reporting at a reduced cost. This grant would enable FNS to serve as the Federal coordinating point for funds from FNS and other Federal partners in the National Collaborative on Child Obesity Research (NCCOR) into a consolidated grant to support annual assessment and reporting by an independent academic institution. The base grant amount would support three years of core measures of interest to FNS. Contributions from other NCCOR partners would fund modules of specific interest to them, such as assessment of local wellness policies on physical activity.

### **Center for Behavioral Economics in Child Nutrition Programs (BEN)**

This funding will support an additional year of FNS and ERS's continuing partnership with Cornell University's Behavioral Economics in Nutrition (BEN) Center, the leading research organization examining the impact of behavioral economics principles on students' choices in school lunchrooms. The Center's "Smarter Lunchroom" strategies are affecting important changes in school cafeterias nationwide. The Center is also examining plate waste in school lunch programs. This year's funding will support a special focus on expanding the adoption of Smarter Lunchroom strategies broadly among NSLP schools.

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

In 2012, FNS established the USDA Center for WIC Nutrition Education Innovations via a competitive grant to Baylor University. This Center provides competitive sub-grants for innovative research on effective WIC nutrition education and promotes delivery of science-based quality nutrition services in WIC. This second round of funding supports the continued work of this Center and additional innovative sub-grants with a focus on preventing development of child overweight and obesity.

### **WIC Food Package Contents Study**

In 2011, FNS published a report on the choices each WIC State agency had made in 2009 in exercising the flexibilities allowed under the new WIC food packages. Since this early implementation, States have made numerous adjustments to their policy choices. This study would update the previous study with an examination of which foods States offer in their food packages after 5 years of experience with the new food packages.

### **USDA Foods Healthy Eating Index Update**

In 2012, FNS published the report "Nutrient and MyPyramid Analysis of USDA Foods in Five of Its Food and Nutrition Programs" which includes assessment of NSLP and other USDA Foods using the CNPP's Healthy Eating Index 2005. Since this analysis was completed, CNPP has updated to the Healthy Eating Index 2010 (HEI-2010). This report will provided updated

information on USDA Foods using the HEI-2010, and allow for testing to determine the impact of potential changes in USDA Foods on the HEI-2010 score.

### **FNS-ARS Collaboration on School Meals Nutrient Analysis**

This project will support a thorough nutrition analysis of school foods in the School Nutrition and Meal Cost Study. The Food Surveys Research Group of the Agricultural Research Service will provide nutritional information for 250 new foods identified in the study but not found in existing data bases.

### **Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program Pilot to Include Canned, Frozen and Dried Fruits and Vegetables**

Section 4214 of the Agricultural Act of 2014 directed the Food and Nutrition Service to implement and evaluate a pilot in at least five States, expanding the scope of the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP). Currently, FFVP only allows participating schools to serve fresh produce. The pilot would allow schools to add canned, frozen, or dried fruits and vegetables to the items they offer. The evaluation of the pilot would consider its impact on fruit and vegetable consumption, participation, implementation strategies at the schools, and stakeholders' perceptions of the program. The legislation directs that the pilot should be implemented in School Year 2014-2015, and that an interim report be published by January 1, 2015, and a final report be published at the end of the pilot.

## **IMPROVE PROGRAM INTEGRITY AND REDUCE IMPROPER PAYMENTS**

### **Improper Payments in CACFP Centers**

This study will provide a comprehensive measure of the level of erroneous payments (dollars and rates) to child care centers and center sponsors participating in CACFP. It builds on the methods developed for school meals in the Access, Participation, Eligibility and Certification (APEC) study series. Estimates will be designed to meet the measurement requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. The findings from this study would complement the annual measure of reimbursement "tiering" errors in family day care homes for IPERA reporting on CACFP.

### **CACFP Family Day Care Homes Meal Claims Feasibility Study**

The study would examine ways to provide a measure of erroneous payments to family day care homes (FDCH) FDCHs participating in CACFP. Different methods of estimating improper payments and their rates will be developed and a feasibility study will be conducted in an effort to determine the best means to meet requirements under the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010.

### **Developing Recommendations for Scoring SNAP Retailer Applications**

FNS is considering changes to SNAP retailer authorization requirements to ensure that the profile of authorized retailers provides program participants with access to healthful foods while also protecting program integrity. This project would review data available to FNS at the time of retailer application to identify tools and strategies to evaluate applications and inform choices about which retailers would best further the purposes of the program. The project will design one or more options for scoring retailer applications, assess thresholds for approval of retailer

applications given program objectives, and assess potential impacts that implementation of scoring systems would have on the SNAP food retail environments, both in terms of availability of healthful choices and food access.

### **Regional Office Review of Applications (RORA)**

This project reviews a national sample of NSLP applications collected annually by FNS regional offices to determine the extent of administrative error in the local process of approving applications for free and reduced-price school meals. These error rates are reported to comply with the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010.

### **Child and Adult Care Food Program Tiering Error Measurements**

This project supports IPERA requirements by collecting and analyzing nationally-representative data on the accuracy of child care sponsor determinations of reimbursement rates (“tiers”) for family day care home providers in 2014. A report of findings will include the 2014 annual measure and comparison to prior years.

### **Methods for State-Specific Rates of NSLP/SBP Erroneous Payments**

The FNS-sponsored Access, Participation, Eligibility and Certification Study-2 (APEC-2) includes a follow-on report that will provide statistically-derived State-level estimates of school meals erroneous payments. However, while the APEC-2 can provide a rough indicator of relative risk for groups of States (e.g., higher than average, about average, lower than average), it is not a State-representative direct measure, and creating actual annual measures of such erroneous payments at the State level using APEC methodology is cost-prohibitive. This project will explore alternative approaches to developing measurement-based State-specific estimates that are responsive to year-to-year changes in the actual underlying rate in each State. It will provide cost and burden estimates for the implementation of each of these methods.

### **WIC Vendor Error Aging for IPERA Reporting**

This project funds the annual aging of data on erroneous WIC vendor payments for reporting in the USDA financial reports. It helps fulfill the requirements of the Improper Payments Elimination and Recovery Act (IPERA) of 2010. Data from a study of vendor payments in 2012 are adjusted using administrative reports of findings from covert compliance purchases at WIC vendors conducted on an ongoing basis by State WIC agencies.

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

### **Measuring SNAP Access, Trends and Impacts (Microsimulation)**

This on-going project supports several key analytic tools and analyses to address SNAP participation trends and impacts; generates annual reports on the characteristics, participation rates and patterns of participation; and supports the Agency’s capacity to assess cost and distributional impacts of proposed changes to SNAP and other nutrition assistance programs.

### **Review of Child Nutrition Data and Analysis for Program Management**

The current routine data collection requirements for the child nutrition programs have their roots in the paper and early computer eras and reflect concerns with paperwork and reporting burden. In many cases, data collected at the service delivery point (e.g., school or child care provider) are

aggregated at one or more level before reporting to FNS as State data, resulting in a significant loss of potentially valuable information along the way. Some States/school districts have developed more sophisticated systems; however, there is no comprehensive approach to utilizing program data timely and effectively for program oversight and management improvement at the Federal, State and local levels. This project would provide for a comprehensive assessment of the FNS child nutrition management information needs and make recommendations for information system improvements, as well as identify the reporting and recordkeeping requirements and costs needed to support such improvements.

### **Updating the WIC Participant Characteristics (PC) Reporting System**

This project will form and support a task force of subject matter experts to examine WIC data and analysis needs and develop potential improvements. Recent changes in WIC have highlighted the need to ensure that FNS and its partners have the information necessary for effective program management, performance assessment and monitoring. In addition, the closure two years ago of CDC's Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance System, which complemented WIC PC, left an important information gap. This task force will examine what data are currently available to States, what FNS collects through PC and other resources, and recommend possible modifications to PC data collection timing, data elements, analyses and reporting, along with other opportunities for using and analyzing data to further the program's management, health and nutrition goals, without unnecessary burden.

### **Cost Dynamics of USDA Foods Usage in School Meals**

This project will provide an examination of how USDA Foods impact USDA school meal program costs. While recent study data shows that USDA Foods represent 10 to 15 percent of the total cost of food acquisitions in the National School Lunch Program, these data reflect the nominal Federal cost of these foods. They do not include costs associated with the processing of USDA Foods into products more useable by the school district. This study would examine the true value of USDA Foods to schools, and how this varies based on factors such as State policies, school district size, meal participation rates, urbanicity/rurality, participation in buying cooperatives and State of origin of the food item. The information may help to identify potential changes to the procurement and distribution process that could make the use of USDA Foods more cost-efficient for schools.

### **Analysis of FY 2013 SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) State Plans and Program Data for All States**

The purpose of this project is to assess the availability of the data to examine the reach and the scope of SNAP E&T programs implemented by the States, in order to facilitate monitoring of E&T services and develop guidance for best practices. The analysis will use State E&T plans for FY13, program activity report data for FY13, and expenditure data. It will assess how well planned participation levels and program costs align with results, how costs vary by program type, and whether additional data collected by the program could inform program performance.

### **Direct Certification in the National School Lunch Program: Report to Congress**

This supports the statutorily required annual report to Congress on the effectiveness of State and local efforts to directly certify SNAP participant children for free school meals. The measures developed for this report are used by USDA to make performance awards to States with high

direct certification rates or substantial improvement in their rates, and to identify States whose performance falls below statutory thresholds and are required to develop and implement continuous improvement plans. The school year 2013-2014 report will be the first to use State reported data from new and revised forms intended to improve the report's estimates of direct certification performance.

### **Pricing Behavior of WIC Participants**

WIC participants have little incentive to pay attention to the price of products on their food instrument. This study will provide a white paper based on consultations with experts that explores methods States could consider to incentivize WIC clients to be more conscious of the prices charged for WIC foods. In addition to identifying opportunities, it will describe the challenges that would be faced in implementing these price sensitizing changes.

### **FDPIR Regional Vendor Pilot Evaluation**

This operational pilot began to collect administrative data earlier this year. This project will analyze the data to examine whether the new distribution method produced cost savings over the regular distribution method.

### **Special Nutrition Quick Response Surveys**

This blanket purchase agreement will be used to support development, pretesting, OMB approval, fielding, analysis and reporting of small, fast-turnaround data collections. This functionality will enable FNS to produce short, limited-topic analyses and memoranda or short reports to answer key questions about the program, further understanding of issues, facilitate decision-making for policy concerns and provide information for regulatory impact analyses.

### **WIC Quick Response Surveys**

This project will support development and testing of a questionnaire, OMB clearance, and rapid data collection, analysis and reporting on a limited number of topics of pressing policy interest in FY2014.

### **CN Program Analytic Support**

This provides additional funds for an existing contract to support a variety of small-scale data collections and quick turnaround analyses to support legislative, budget and policy development. Analyses to be conducted could include analysis of the School Food Purchase Study data set focused on USDA Foods.

### **WIC Program Analytic Support**

This project adds funds to an existing contract to prepare estimates for WIC eligible populations used in the program's funding formula, as well as a variety of quick turnaround analyses to support legislative, budget and policy development. It may also be used to support small-scale data collections such as periodic determination of the State average redemption rate for WIC cash value vouchers for fruits and vegetables.