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## **APPENDIX C-2. SITE VISIT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

# **Assessing the Child Nutrition State Administrative Expense Allocation Formula (Child Nutrition SAE)**

## **Site Visit Interview**

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## Introduction

Good morning/afternoon. Thank you again for taking the time to talk with me today. My name is <INTERVIEWER'S NAME> and I work for Westat, a private research company in Rockville, Maryland. With me today is <NOTE TAKER'S NAME> who will be taking notes.

## Consent Form

**PURPOSE:** The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) is interested in identifying the factors that influence state administrative expense (SAE) spending and assessing the effectiveness of the current SAE allocation formula. FNS contracted with Westat to examine SAE allocation, reallocation, State SAE spending patterns, and factors affecting State use of SAE allocation. We will also identify potential alternatives for the current SAE allocation formula.

**HOW YOU WERE SELECTED:** We are conducting case studies of 12 States, including interviews with State Directors and key staff to understand how State agencies use SAE funds and the factors that influence spending. You have been identified as someone who is involved with the SAE budgeting or spending process in your State agency.

**INFORMATION TO BE COLLECTED:** During this interview, we will ask questions to try to understand the process the agency goes through to budget and spend the SAE allocation.

**RISKS AND PRIVACY:** There is little risk to being part of this study. **Your name will not be linked to any of your responses.** In our reports, we may include quotes from our respondents, but these will be presented without the speaker's name and in such a way that you could not be identified. There are no known individual benefits to participating in this study but your participation will help the FNS improve the SAE formula.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:** Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will not have any impact on your position or child nutrition programs. You can take a break, skip questions or stop participating at any time without penalty.

**QUESTIONS:** If you have questions about your rights or welfare as a research participant, please call the Westat Human Subjects Protections office at 1-888-920-7631. Please leave a message with your full name, the

name of the research study, which is the Child Nutrition SAE study, and a phone number. Someone will return your call as soon as possible.

We have planned for this discussion to last about 2 hours with a break halfway through. Is that still okay?

With your permission, I would like to record this discussion to help us fill any gaps in our written notes. The recordings, transcripts, and any notes we have will be stored on Westat's secure server and will be destroyed after the project is complete.

Do you have any questions? [ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS]

If you agree to participate in this interview, please read the following statement and sign your name below.

**I have read the above information about this project and my rights as a participant. I consent to participate in this research and to have this discussion audiotaped.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Printed Name**

**If you do not agree to be audio recorded, please cross out "and to have this discussion audio-taped" in the sentence above.**

May I turn on the audio recorder now?

[IF YES: ONCE RECORDER IS ON, "Now that the recorder is on, do I still have your permission to audio record this interview?" MAKE SURE YOU GET AN AUDIBLE "Yes" FROM EACH RESPONDENT.]

## I. Warm Up

1. [**New respondent**] To begin, please tell me about your current role and responsibilities.
  - a. How long have you worked here?

[**Previously interviewed**] Thanks for taking the time to complete the pre-visit interview over the phone with our team. The information you provided on your role and how your agency is structured was very helpful. Has anything changed since we last spoke with you?

## II. State Administrative Expense (SAE) Spending Patterns

[**As appropriate, refer to state SAE plan and other documents provided by the State.**]

I would first like to discuss some of the specifics regarding the SAE planning process.

2. Once you have been notified of your SAE allocation for the year, what is the process you go through to decide what the funds will be spent on?
  - a. Is anyone else involved in that decision-making process? If so, who?
  - b. If you have limited funds how do you set spending priorities?
  - c. Do the funding needs vary much from quarter-to-quarter?
  - d. Does the State legislature have a say in how the funds are spent?
  
3. What are the broad categories of SAE spending?

**Probes:** salaries, facilities, training, TA, other.

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- a. The agency submits an SAE plan to FNS that outlines its planned SAE spending. In general, how does planned spending compare to actual spending?
4. How are SAE funds allocated across the child nutrition programs that your agency administers?
    - a. Are there areas that you feel need additional SAE funding? Why?
  5. Next I'd like to discuss the reallocation process and your agency's use of reallocated funds.

[If requested reallocated funds] Based on the information we have from FNS – the agency received reallocated funds [NUMBER] times over the past 5 years, and spent the funds on [list categories of spending]. Does that sound accurate to you?

    - a. How do you decide there is a need to request reallocated funds? Who are the key players involved in the decision-making process?
    - b. Are there any challenges the agency has faced with the reallocation process? Describe.
    - c. Have you ever had trouble spending down the reallocated funds by the end of the fiscal year? Describe.

[If did not request reallocated funds] Why did the agency opt not to request reallocated funds in the last 5 years?

- a. In what situations might you decide to request reallocated funds?
- b. Are there any challenges the agency has faced in the past with the reallocation process? Describe.

6. We are also interested in circumstances surrounding the return of unused SAE funds.

[ **Has returned funds**] Our information shows that you have returned SAE funds [**NUMBER**] times over the past 5 years. If you can recall, what were the reasons that funds were returned?

- a. At what point in the fiscal year would you usually know if the agency will spend the entire allocation?

[**Has not returned funds**] Our information shows that your agency has not returned SAE funds in the last 5 years. In your opinion, what made that possible?

**Probes:** agency's budget and planning process, state environment, other

- a. What strategies would you have for other States to achieve a similar outcome?

7. As you know, State agencies may carry over up to 20 percent of their initial SAE allocation to the next fiscal year. According to the information we have, your agency carried over funds in [**LIST FY's**]. How does the flexibility of carryover funds influence your SAE budgeting and planning process?

- a. What challenges, if any, do you have with the carryover restrictions?

8. [**For states with multiple CN agencies**] States are also permitted to transfer SAE funds within the State to other agencies that receive SAE. Your State has done this [**NUMBER**] times in the last five years.

[ **Has transferred funds**] What was the situation under which the agencies decided to transfer funds?

- a. What was the process like to transfer those funds?
- b. Did the FNS regional office help facilitate the transfer?
- c. Are there any State policies on transferring funds? Describe.

[ **Has not transferred funds**] What would be some scenarios in which you would consider transferring funds?

- a. Has the FNS regional office ever discussed transferring funds with your agency? What were the circumstances?
- b. Are there any State policies on transferring funds? Describe.

### **III. Factors Affecting State Use of SAE Allocations**

Next I want to talk about some of the factors that may affect your agency's use of SAE.

9. From your perspective, how does the SAE fit into your agency's overall budget process?
10. In your opinion, how well can the current SAE allocation meet the agency's current and future needs?
  - a. Do you feel that your agency has enough SAE funding to operate effectively? Why or why not?
  - b. How do you handle new priorities that arise (e.g., new legislative/FNS mandates)?

11. Let's talk about when funds are made available by FNS. How does the timing of when the agency receives SAE funds from FNS impact the agency's work?  
**Probe:** if funds arrive later than expected
12. If it were up to you, what would be the ideal time in the fiscal year to have reallocation funds made available? Why?
- How long does it usually take to hear back on a reallocation request?
  - Does the timeliness of those responses or the distribution of funds ever deter you from making the request? Explain.
13. What challenges have you faced in spending all of the SAE funds within the required timeframe?
- What factors negatively impact the agency's ability to use its SAE funds?  
**Probes:** Number of SFAs/institutions/recipient agencies, State geography and travel distances?
14. What factors positively impact the agency's ability to use all of its SAE funds?
15. Each State is required to contribute State funds to operate the child nutrition programs. The minimum required level is the amount the State contributed in FY 1977, which for your State is [NUMBER]. Last year your State contributed [NUMBER]. Can you tell me how the State decides how much to contribute each year?
- Is there any legislation or documentation available about your State's funding requirement?



- b. What are these State funds used for with regard to the child nutrition programs?
  - c. Has the amount provided changed significantly over the years? Please explain.
16. Are there any State executive mandates that affect SAE budgeting and spending? Describe.
17. How do advocacy organizations influence SAE budgeting or spending?
18. What impact does SAE funding have on the agency's staffing levels?
19. Has the agency used SAE to make any technological investments for child nutrition programs? If so, describe.
- a. When did this occur?
  - b. How were these investments funded?
  - c. Did those technological investments impact staffing needs? How so?
20. In general, what impact would you say technology has had on the use of SAE funds?

#### **IV. Alternatives to the Current Formula**

[Provide respondents with a copy of 'Description of SAE Allocation Process' as a reference. Walk the respondent through the formula, as needed.]

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Now I would like to ask for your input on the current formula used by FNS to allocate SAE funds to State agencies.

21. If you could, what aspects of the formula would you change without changing the total amount of funding? Why?
  - a. How would those changes help your agency in its work?

## V. Program-Specific Questions

[These will be asked based on which program(s) are administered by the agency being interviewed.]

I would like to ask you a few questions about the specific Child Nutrition programs your agency administers, and how they impact use of SAE.

### **School Meal Programs:**

The school meal programs for SAE purposes are the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), the School Breakfast Program (SBP), and the Special Milk Program (SMP).

22. [If separate agency administers FDP] Could you tell me a little about the communication and/or coordination between the separate agencies that administer School Meals and USDA Foods?

**Probes:** around program issues, transferring funds between agencies, other

- b. What influence has this had on the Food Distribution Program (FDP)? On the school programs?

23. [If same agency administers schools and FDP] What is the benefit of having the Food Distribution Program for schools and the school nutrition programs all administered by a single agency?

**Probe:** more streamlined, better coordination, other

- a. What are the challenges to administering those programs in one agency?
24. How did your agency utilize Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) State funds?
- a. How did those funds help the agency's work?
  - b. Were there any problems with accessing or spending those funds? Describe.
  - c. What impact did it have on your use of SAE funds?
  - d. How did it influence your administration of the school meal programs?

25. How has implementing a new Administrative Review process impacted your use of SAE?

**Probes:** staffing changes to accommodate increased number of reviews, technology changes

### **Child and Adult Care Food Program:**

Now I would like to know a little about the administration of the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

26. How many CACFP agreements does your agency currently manage?

27. What factors influence your spending of SAE funds towards CACFP?

**Probes:** number of agreements, number of staff involved, other

a. How do those factors influence your CACFP budgeting and spending?

28. [If Florida or Indiana] Could you tell me a little about how the separate agencies coordinate to administer the child and adult portions of CACFP?

**Probes:** on program issues, funding

a. What impact does this separate administration have on use of SAE for the child and adult portions of CACFP?

### **Food Distribution for Schools:**

Finally, I'd like to talk about your State's administration of the Food Distribution Program for Schools (FDP).

29. [If agency that administers schools is separate agency] Could you tell me about how [NAMES OF EACH AGENCY] coordinate to administer School Meals and USDA Foods?

**Probes:** on program issues, funding

a. What impact does this separate administration have on use of SAE for the FDP? On the school programs?

30. Has the Web Based Supply Chain Management system (WBSCM, pronounced "web scam" or "web SCM") been deployed to local agencies?

a. How has WBSCM helped you in your work?

- b. What challenges have staff encountered with rolling out this system to local agencies?
- c. What challenges have staff encountered with using WBSCM?

## **VI. Interview Wrap-Up**

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I have a few final questions.

- 31. Reflecting on everything we have talked about, are there any other challenges with managing SAE funds?
- 32. What do you think your State does really well with regard to budgeting and managing SAE funds?

Do you have any final questions or thoughts?

Thank you!