

Appendix E4: Email to Schedule LEA Telephone Interviews and Frequently Asked Questions

Dear [LEA DIRECTOR NAME],

We are writing to request your participation in an important national study, the Evaluation of the Independent Review Process (“IRA Study”). As explained in the notification letter you received from your State Director, [NAME], this study will provide the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) with information about the effectiveness of the independent review of applications (IRA) requirement for school meal programs, also called the second review of applications. The study will examine how State agencies and local education agencies (LEAs) conduct the IRA and report results to FNS, and assess whether IRA is effective in identifying and reducing administrative error in the certification of household applications. FNS has contracted with Westat to conduct this study.

The study has three phases: 1) an online survey of all State Child Nutrition Directors, which was recently completed; 2) telephone interviews with selected LEAs that have conducted IRA; and 3) the collection and review of a sample of household applications from a subsample of the LEAs interviewed.

Your LEA, [INSERT NAME], has been selected to participate in the telephone interviews [IF APPLICABLE: and to provide household applications]. We would like to conduct a telephone interview with you to understand how the IRA process works at your LEA. Note that Westat will lead the discussion, and USDA staff will not join. The interview will take up to 90 minutes.

[If applicable] Following the interview, we will work with your staff to collect a sample of household applications for school meal benefits for two, nonconsecutive school years. Westat will review the applications from these LEAs in order to help assess the effectiveness of the IRA process at reducing certification error, and will report the results at the aggregate level (i.e., without identifying individual LEAs).

The law governing the school meal programs requires *organizations* participating in the programs to cooperate in studies such as the *IRA Study*. While *your* participation in this study is completely voluntary, your feedback will improve our understanding of the IRA process and its effectiveness.

We encourage you to identify 1-2 key staff in your organization who will be able to join you and contribute to the discussion. **In the tables below, please provide us with the contact information of these key staff who plan to attend the discussion and let us know what times work best for you and your team.**

The following staff will attend the discussion:

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, an agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 0584-XXXX. The time required to complete this information collection is estimated to average 10 minutes per response, including the time for reviewing instructions and Frequently Asked Questions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information.

Staff Name	Email

On which of the following dates and times are you and your staff available? Select all slots that will work for you.

	DATE							
9:00 AM -10:30 AM <local time zone>								
1:00 PM - 2:30 PM <local time zone>								

We have attached Frequently Asked Questions with additional information about the study. If you have any questions about the study or the interview, please email us at [study email] or call us toll-free at [study phone number].

The final report will be published online after the study ends in February 2019. Should you choose to participate, FNS will email you a link to where you can download the report.

Your partnership matters to us! We look forward to including you in this important study.

Sincerely,

The Westat Study Team



Independent Review of Applications (IRA) Study

1. What is the purpose of this study?

The IRA Study will provide detailed information on the Independent Review of Applications (IRA) requirement for school meal programs from the perspective of State agencies and local education agencies (LEAs). FNS hired Westat to conduct the study to describe the IRA process and reporting via the FNS-874 form, which captures the activity of the second review, and explore the effectiveness of the IRA process to reduce administrative errors. The final report will describe the IRA process and reporting procedures, highlight best practices and make recommendations to improve the process and increase accuracy.

2. Who is sponsoring this study?

The United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (USDA FNS) is sponsoring this study.

3. Who is conducting this study?

Westat, Inc. is conducting this study on behalf of USDA FNS. Westat is among the nation's leading research organizations, with over 50 years of experience conducting research for government agencies. For more information about Westat, go to www.westat.com.

4. Who will be participating in this study?

We are conducting the IRA Study across the country. All State Child Nutrition Directors will be asked to complete an online survey. We will then select a diverse group of 30 LEAs to participate in telephone interviews, and 20 of those LEAs will also submit a sample of household applications.

5. What is the role of study participants?

State-level. We will conduct an online survey of State Child Nutrition Directors where we will ask about the State's data collection and reporting procedures for the IRA process.

LEAs. We will carry out individual telephone interviews with 30 LEA Directors to understand how each LEA conducts the second review and completes the FNS-874 form. From 20 of those LEAs, we will ask for their assistance in transmitting to Westat a sample of household applications. Westat will conduct its own review of those household applications to determine eligibility for free, reduced price, or paid meals.

6. Why should I participate?

Your input is valuable. Participating LEA staff are "the voice" of many districts like yours across the country. Information from the study will help FNS improve required data collection and identify best practices to reduce the incidence of errors and burden.

Keep in mind this is a research study; it is not an audit or monitoring visit. The study will not affect meal reimbursements received by participating LEAs, nor school meal program benefits received by students or households. The [Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010](#) includes a provision that participating LEAs and schools cooperate with officials and contractors to conduct program research and evaluation.

7. Will the information we provide be secure and private?

All information gathered from the States and LEAs, including household applications, is for research purposes only and we will keep this data private. Additionally, public documents or public use data files will not identify individual persons, LEAs, or States.

8. Will you collect and store any data related to a student that would make them identifiable?

Yes, Westat will collect and store all information from household applications for school meals. The data collected will be stored in our secure and password-protected database, on a secured network server. As required by our contract with USDA FNS, many steps are taken to keep all data collected private to the full extent allowed by law. The IRA Study will adhere to Westat's Information Technology and Systems Security Policy and Best Practices to protect the privacy of data collected. The policy includes practices and control procedures that maintain data security. If needed, we can provide more details about the policy.

Finally, as required by our contract, no personally identifiable information on students or households will be in the reports we prepare.

9. What are the processes for deletion of the data?

This study has an estimated end date of September 25, 2020. After the study is completed and after receiving approval from FNS, Westat will destroy the data and provide documentation of the destruction to FNS. The Westat Institutional Review Board monitors the process of data destruction through requiring compliance via data destruction policies and completion of relevant paperwork. Data destruction will occur no later than 12 months after the end of the contract (September 2021).

At the completion of the study, Westat will redact all personally identifying information and submit the data files to FNS. FNS will retain the raw data files for statistical and descriptive purposes, and will follow all applicable government standards to safeguard them.

10. Are data collected regarding families strictly voluntary? Can we ask parents first if they want to participate and then provide you with a list of parent volunteers, or do you have to provide us with a list of whom you want to interview?

The data collected from the LEA about families is necessary to implement the study according to the study design. The study design requires that we randomly select (sample) households for the survey. We will request a data file from the LEA with the information needed for sampling, and then work with you to pull the sample of household applications. We will discuss this

approach further and address any questions or concerns during a preliminary phone call with LEA staff prior to selecting the sample of applications.

11. What if I have more questions? Whom do I contact for more information?

For more information about the study, you may contact:

- Melissa Rothstein, Project Director: 301-315-5975; MelissaRothstein@westat.com
- [Jinee Burdg, FNS Project Officer: 703-305-2744; Jinee.Burdg@fns.usda.gov](mailto:Jinee.Burdg@fns.usda.gov)