

**Summary of National Food Stamp Nutrition Education Conference:
A Vision, A Journey, A Partnership
15-17 March 2004 – Columbus, Ohio
Hosted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative State Research,
Education and Extension Service and Land-Grant University Partners**

Background

In early 2003, a national conference was requested within the Extension/Land-Grant University System to address concerns about providing quality programming consistent with Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Guidance and drawing upon the strengths of successful Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) efforts. Information gleaned from the 2002 state reports, national Program Development Team, FNS, Cooperative Extension System (CES) administrators, FSNE directors/coordinators, and Food Stamp Program (FSP) partners was used to guide the development of this conference. The conference's identified purpose was to "Strengthen FSNE within the Extension/Land-Grant University System and with other interested partners and cooperators."

Objectives and Outcomes

Conference objectives and desired outcomes were established by a planning committee of state and national representatives from the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES)/CES and FNS. These were:

Objectives

- Work toward a common vision among all who are a part of Food Stamp Nutrition Education
- Share new initiatives, models, and promising practices in the journey to reach more food stamp participants, address unmet needs in economically challenged areas, and provide effective nutrition education strategies
- Draw upon the strengths of partnerships to support food stamp participants' potential for change

Desired Outcomes

- Heightened focus on food stamp participants as the target audience
- Increased understanding of FNS policies, priorities and future initiatives pertaining to FSNE and increased submission of state nutrition education plans that comply with FNS FSNE Guidance
- Identification of new skills, methods, and resources to increase healthy eating and active lifestyles among food stamp participants in order to promote health and reduce risks of diet related diseases through nutrition education
- Increased FSNE quality, consistency, and capacity to deliver outcome based nutrition education.
- Enhanced communication that supports trust based on understanding - local, state, regional, national communication within and across projects, institutions, organizations, and agencies

Session specific inputs, outputs (process), and desired outcomes were also identified and are listed in the program agenda (see www.csrees-fsnep.org website).

Participation and Proceedings

Conference participation exceeded expectations, given recent limitations put on travel using FNS funds and current state economies. More than 220 individuals attended, representing 49 states and 1 territory within the Extension/Land-Grant University System, 18 state food stamp offices, 15 state public health, tribal, and other projects, six of seven regional FNS offices, federal partners from three USDA agencies (FNS, the Economic Research Service [ERS], and CSREES), and two professional associations (Society for Nutrition Education and National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges).

Participants had considerable opportunities to learn, share, and dialogue with colleagues and other stake holders on items of mutual interest and concern through plenary sessions involving federal agencies and other national partners, concurrent promising practice sessions, topic specific trainings, and facilitated discussion groups. Conference proceedings, including themes from facilitated discussions, can be viewed on the www.csrees-fsnep.org website.

Response and Recommendations

Conference evaluations showed that the single greatest perceived benefit was the opportunity for “all stakeholders” to learn first hand from FNS about changes in the Guidance and future directions, and to engage in frank and open discussion about what dictates national policy and what is needed for FSNE to be successful at the state and local level. Participants also valued the networking and sharing of ideas and resources within Extension and with public health, state FSP offices, and regional FNS contacts, noting that the conference afforded a rare opportunity to have such dialogue.

Concerns focused predominantly on timeliness of the plan approval process, feasibility of targeting food stamp recipients and applicants exclusively, accessibility of the regional offices to subcontractors, and level of involvement by state FSP offices. These concerns were voiced by subcontractors and state FSP contacts, alike, and were reflected in conference evaluations and facilitated group discussions. Other topics of considerable discussion were: consistency in interpretation of the Guidance, and perceived value of FSNE efforts – building on strengths and balancing trust with accountability.

Specific sessions appealed to different interests and needs, with the highest disparity of response found in the applied research/evaluation session. Response to reporting and evaluation was more generally favorable in the Community Nutrition Education (CNE) online reporting system training sessions, where participants could self-select. Interest was expressed in having more training on this system and making it available locally to build into state planning and program management. Interest was also expressed in the FSP Map Machine, as a means of accessing state data from secondary sources.

Although some participants were frustrated that more was not accomplished, that specific questions were not answered, and that there were clear differences among stakeholders in who the target audience should be and how they can best be reached, most respondents felt it was “extremely important to continue this effort because of the need for communication between agencies and among programs.”

The two areas identified most by participants as actions they would take following the conference were to: 1) increase contact, share more information, and work more closely with state and local food stamp offices in developing plans and communicating about FSNE; and 2) carefully scrutinize, align, and streamline plans and provide staff training on the Guidance. To a lesser degree, participants mentioned plans to re-think the waivers and how to work more with the food stamp audience, to strengthen/identify new collaborations and partnerships, and to work more with other subcontractors in their state. A few participants expressed relief that they were not the only ones that were struggling; others raised the question of whether FSNE was worth the time and effort given recent approval challenges.

Evaluations showed that participants found the conference highly valuable/useful (1.3 on scale where 1 = highly valuable/useful, 2 = somewhat valuable/useful, and 3 = not valuable/useful). They considered it well worth the time, effort, and cost, noting that the conference was well-organized, refreshing, and helpful. They stressed the importance of continuing this effort because of the need for communication among agencies and programs and a collective vision. Appreciation was expressed to FNS for supporting the conference, and suggestions were given to have similar conferences bi-annually or when there are major developments, possibly in conjunction with other meetings held by partners/collaborators such as the Association of State Nutrition Network Administrators (ASNNA), American Public Human Services Association, (APHSA), ERS, and FNS.

Suggestions for future conferences focused primarily on more in-depth discussion with concrete examples on the Guidance - including financial aspects, exclusivity, and teaching content; more interaction with FNS regional offices and presentations from state FSP representatives; sharing examples of planning, programs, state initiatives, and collaborative partnerships that are working – to make better use of expertise and resources available. Also identified were more on community, outer spheres of influence, curricula evaluation, relationships among agencies/partners, and hands on learning. There was general agreement on the need for good continuous updates, facilitated discussion groups, presenter/audience interchange, and concurrent sessions to allow opportunity for dialogue and sharing to improve efforts of all.