

Background

In the Food Stamp Program, States have the option to provide nutrition education to food stamp recipients and eligible non-participants as part of their administrative operations. The scope of food stamp nutrition education (FSNE) has expanded rapidly since its inception – with the Federal share of costs growing from less than \$1 million in 1992 to \$228 million in 2004.

The goal of FSNE is to provide educational programs that increase, within a limited budget, the likelihood that food stamp recipients make healthy food choices and choose active lifestyles consistent with the most recent advice reflected in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and *MyPyramid*. Within this general guidance, however, States have the flexibility to design a wide variety of nutrition education initiatives and operate through contracted implementing agencies, local projects and various partner organizations.

This report presents a comprehensive and systematic national description of food stamp nutrition education operations in fiscal year (FY) 2004. It also provides a comparison of those operations to the standards of excellence for nutrition education developed as the *Food Stamp Nutrition Education Guiding Principles*, released by FNS in September 2005.

Findings

Food stamp nutrition education has a broad reach, but is not universally available. Over 80 percent of U.S. counties had some nutrition education in FY 2004, although the breadth and depth of services varies. In general, providers felt they were targeting populations most in need of services, and, for the most part, reaching them. Reasons for gaps in service included difficulties obtaining non-Federal funding to match the Federal contribution and the challenge

of reaching hard-to-serve populations such as working adults or seniors.

The majority of persons receiving nutrition education are food stamp recipients and eligibles. Although participant data are limited, providers estimate that about half of those who received nutrition education in FY 2004 were food stamp recipients and applicants, and about one quarter were eligible non-participants (with income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level).

Nutrition education activities are largely directed at children and women. Providers estimate that 42 percent of nutrition education participants were school-age children and about 25 percent were adult women. Public schools and other youth education sites were the most commonly reported settings for food stamp nutrition education.

Food stamp nutrition education activities are numerous and diverse. The most common types of interventions were a series of group classes and communications through brochures, flyers, bus wraps, and public service announcements. About one-third of providers reported using social marketing approaches.

FSNE participants may not understand that the nutrition education services they receive are a benefit of the Food Stamp Program. While 94 percent of State food stamp agencies and 88 percent of implementing agencies viewed nutrition education as a Food Stamp Program benefit, fewer promoted it as such. Many local providers were reluctant to associate their activities with the Food Stamp Program, other than on printed materials, expressing concern that stigma could be a barrier to client participation in nutrition education.

State food stamp agencies contract with a variety of organizations to provide nutrition

education. Most providers (55 percent) were USDA Cooperative Extension Service organizations within land grant universities; the remainder was a combination of State and local health agencies, emergency food providers and networks or coalitions of multiple agencies.

Implementing agencies are the key decision makers regarding nutrition education planning and implementation. In FY 2004, the role of State food stamp agencies was limited and varied by activity. States were most likely to be involved in the selection of target audiences and with funding decisions. Local food stamp office involvement was usually limited to distributing nutrition education brochures and manuals.

Evaluation activity is common, but the focus of evaluations varies and the results are inconclusive. The majority of implementing agencies (74 percent) reported that they conducted outcome evaluations on at least some aspects of FSNE services in FY 2004. However, providers often did not distinguish between program monitoring activities and outcome evaluation. Likewise, the typical evaluation approach may not support strong conclusions about the effect of FSNE on desired behavioral outcomes.

On average, total food stamp nutrition education spending in FY 2004 was slightly more than \$12 per food stamp participant. State spending varied considerably, with half spending between \$6 and \$19 per food stamp participant. Total outlays ranged from \$20,000 in Hawaii to \$65 million in California, with a median State total of \$3.5 million.

Method

The FSNE Systems Review collected information in three stages. First, data were extracted from each State's FY 2004 FSNE planning documents. Second, web-based surveys were conducted of all State food stamp agencies and all implementing agencies they contracted with to provide nutrition education services in FY 2004. Survey response rates were high with completed surveys received from

50 out of 52 State food stamp agencies (96 percent) and 84 out of 93 implementing agencies (90 percent). Lastly, on-site in-depth interviews were conducted with FSNE officials for a sample of State food stamp agencies, implementing agencies, local project directors, nutrition educators, and program partners in 28 States. A systematic random sample of implementing agencies ensured appropriate representation by organizational type, FSNE budget and geographic distribution. The sample was expanded to include State food stamp agencies associated with the sampled implementing agencies and a purposeful sample of their local projects and partners. The final number of interviews included 27 State food stamp agencies, 34 implementing agencies, 24 State-level partners, 67 local projects, 43 local partners, and 32 nutrition educators.

For More Information

Bell, L. and Tao, F. et al. (2006). *Food Stamp Nutrition Education Systems Review: Final Report*. Prepared by Abt Associates for the Food and Nutrition Service. Available on-line at www.fns.usda.gov/oane

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