

How to Implement Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment



VENA is a process and an approach that allows for continual improvement in conducting WIC nutrition assessments. The implementation of VENA will be a gradual process determined by each State agency's current nutrition assessment practices and staffing. The previous chapters outlined the process of a WIC nutrition assessment, and described the characteristics and competencies necessary to conduct a value enhanced nutrition assessment in WIC. This section will identify the steps involved in VENA implementation.

Steps in the VENA

Implementation Process

Key steps involved in the VENA implementation process will be to:

1. Become familiar with the principles of VENA via the policy, guidance and training;
2. Conduct a self-evaluation of current nutrition assessment practices and summarize findings; and
3. Develop a VENA Implementation Plan.

1. Become familiar with the principles of VENA via Policy, Guidance and Training.

Upon receipt of the VENA Policy and Guidance, the State agency should thoroughly review the document, share it with appropriate staff, discuss and submit questions and concerns to their FNS Regional Office contact(s). FNS Regional Offices will provide opportunities to address State agency questions and concerns and technical assistance to ensure that all State agencies will be VENA compliant by Fiscal Year (FY) 2010.

FNS recognizes the need and importance of staff training for VENA implementation. To assist State agencies with training local agency staff, FNS has contracted with the Rochester Institute of Technology to develop a curriculum for 3 modules: 1) Building Rapport; 2) Critical Thinking; and 3) Health Outcome-Based Nutrition Assessment. Regional training in a "Train-the-Trainer"

format will occur in the latter part of FY 2006. Each State agency will be expected to send staff to the Regional VENA Competency Training. FNS Regional Offices will inform their respective States agencies of the training schedule when such information is confirmed.

2. Conduct a self-evaluation of current nutrition assessment practices.

Each State agency will conduct a self-evaluation of current nutrition assessment policies, procedures and processes, the first step in the development of its implementation plan. The FNS will provide State agencies with a *VENA Implementation Guide* (a separate document) to include more specifics about the self-evaluation process and the implementation plan. Summary findings of the self-evaluation shall be submitted to FNS Regional Offices on or before **December 15, 2006**.

December 2006

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The *purpose* of the self-evaluation is to establish a baseline of *current* nutrition assessment practices - in the context of a *value enhanced* nutrition assessment.

The expected *outcome* of the self-evaluation is a summary of baseline nutrition assessment practices to include identification of strengths and potential areas for improvement in the five priority areas (see below).

The self-evaluation will be *used* as the basis from which 1) the State agency will develop its VENA Implementation Plan; 2) the Regional Office will evaluate the appropriateness of the State agency's VENA Implementation Plan; and 3) the Regional Office will evaluate progress towards achieving VENA during monitoring evaluations, State Plan reviews, etc.

Five priority areas of the self-evaluation

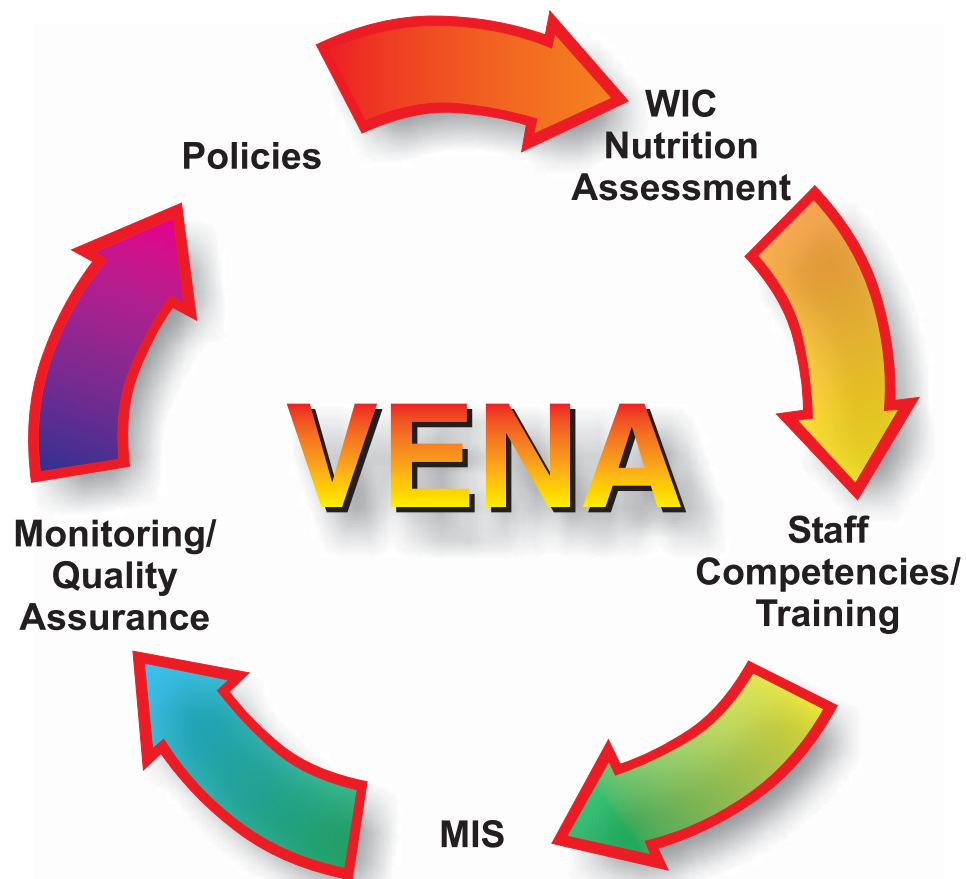
Five priority areas have been identified to help focus a State agency's self-evaluation. The five priority areas are:

- **Policies**
- **WIC nutrition assessment**
- **Staff competencies and training**
- **Management Information System (MIS) needs**
- **Monitoring/Quality Assurance**

Evaluation of these five priority areas as they relate to the various technical pieces presented in the VENA Guidance is essential for

the State agency to establish a baseline of practices and identify strengths and areas for improvement.

The graphic below illustrates there is no start or endpoint to VENA, but each priority area plays a significant and cumulative role in its successful implementation. It is important to understand that VENA is based on a State agency's self-evaluation and subsequent VENA Implementation Plan. VENA implementation is expected to be a gradual shift in WIC nutrition assessment processes allowing for modifications and frequent re-evaluation.



The self-evaluation process

A State agency may choose to begin its self-evaluation with a broad look at operations, and subsequently narrow the focus down to specific components of the assessment process and the competencies needed to carry them out. Alternatively, it can start with specifics and consider how they contribute to overall

operations. Whichever method is chosen, the self-evaluation must cover the five priority areas.

With regards to the staff competencies/training priority area, a State agency may want to wait until its staff attends the Regional Train-the Trainer session before completing this section of the self-evaluation. The other focus areas of the self-evaluation may be started prior to the Regional trainings.

Local agency component of the self-evaluation

The FNS expects that State agencies will incorporate a local agency component into the self-evaluation process. It is crucial to the success of VENA for the State agency to solicit local agency input in order to translate VENA principles into local agency operations and staff practices. Many State agencies have local agency task forces, committees or other established mechanisms to facilitate local agency input. In addition, there are other ways – surveys, observational visits, etc. – to facilitate this. State agencies may choose the manner or means to collect local agency input; the important thing is to incorporate it into the self-evaluation process.

Management Information Systems (MIS) and VENA

Many States are currently in the process of developing or have recently developed MIS to capture and store data related to WIC operations. It is important to note that a sophisticated data system is not a necessity for implementing VENA within a State agency. The State agency should consider the current framework it has in place as the implementation plan is developed, and bear in mind that a data system's main function is to collect and house information in an organized and efficient manner. Increased automation is not the targeted end-point for successful implementation of VENA. Rather, the goal should be to find the balance between a well-designed and highly functional management information system and a quality nutrition assessment performed by well-trained staff. The MIS should serve as an adjunct to enhancing the WIC assessment process.

While a highly automated system may not contribute directly to enhancing the assessment process, the quantity and quality of information captured as well as functionality in organizing and reporting data may play a role in the successful outcomes related to the assessment process. For example, States agencies may want to consider building their system to provide reports that will identify the extent of food package tailoring being done, or track the level of improvement

or change in a participant’s subsequent risk assignments, or even track changes in behaviors. It may prove efficient to have a system that auto-assigns nutrition risks that involve calculations or that have distinct cut-off points. Not only will it save staff time, it could help improve the accuracy of risk assignments or potentially improve data quality.

All these factors need to be given consideration during the planning and development of a data system that will serve the needs of both the end users and program administrators. It is highly recommended that State agencies take steps to ensure that local agency WIC staff members, as well as State-level nutritionists, are an active part of the team that is involved in the development, planning, implementation and ongoing oversight of any data system. It will be particularly important in order to facilitate the successful implementation of VENA.

3. Develop a VENA Implementation Plan.

August 2007

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As previously addressed, results of each individual State agency’s self-evaluation will serve as the foundation for its VENA Implementation Plan, which is due to the FNS on or before **August 15, 2007** with the FY 2008 State Plans. The State agency’s identified strengths and resources, as well as identified challenges and areas for improvement, will result in the development of a unique VENA Implementation Plan. The purpose of the VENA Implementation Plan is to establish action steps and timeframes for completing the actions, to ensure that State agencies have implemented VENA by **October 1, 2009** (FY 2010). The FNS does not expect that every gap identified during the self-evaluation will be addressed immediately; rather, the plan should prioritize the findings, as short- and long-term goals and related action steps.

The FNS acknowledges the many differences among State and local agencies in all aspects of the WIC nutrition assessment process — clinic flow, documentation systems and tools, staffing structures and resources, training programs, MIS design and/or implementation timelines, and other aspects. In evaluating the VENA implementation plans, FNS Regional Offices will consider these differences, and will make every effort to meet State agencies where they are along the continuum. Each State agency’s plan will be examined according to identified resources and needs and how well it defines goals and delineates action steps toward improvement. **Progress and success will be measured against the State agency’s individual plan, not in comparison to other State agencies.**

Projected VENA Timeline:

Early 2006

- Final VENA Policy and Guidance issued.
- VENA Implementation Guidance issued (to include a self-evaluation guide).

July-September 2006

- Regional (for State agency attendance) VENA Competency Training (rapport building, critical thinking, and health outcome-based assessment).

On or Before December 15, 2006

- WIC State agencies submit findings from their self-evaluations of existing nutrition assessment protocols and identify potential areas for enhancement, to FNS Regional Offices.

March 2007

- Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 State Plan Guidance Issued with instructions for State agencies to include a VENA implementation plan and amendments as necessary to implement Policy Memorandum 98-9: WIC Nutrition Risk Criteria; Revision 8, in their State Plan submissions.

On or Before August 15, 2007

- WIC State agencies submit FY 2008 State Plans to include:
 1. VENA implementation plan.
 2. Amendment(s) as necessary to implement WIC Policy Memorandum, 98-9, Revision 8.

Fiscal Year 2008 – 2009

- WIC State agencies revise nutrition assessment policy and procedures, provide necessary staff training, etc., (as described in their FNS approved plans) to implement VENA.

Fiscal Year 2010 (October 1, 2009)

- VENA implemented in all WIC State agencies.



