


Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-528](#), a report to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that poor nutrition and lack of physical activity are catching up to tobacco use as the leading cause of death in the United States. In addition to having negative health outcomes, children with poor nutrition may have a harder time succeeding in school than other children. To help improve nutrition, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides nutrition education through five of its programs. The department spent \$472 million on these efforts in fiscal year 2002.

GAO was asked: (1) What key actions can officials take to increase the likelihood of success in nutrition education? (2) Do USDA and state and local officials take these actions during program design, service delivery, and program monitoring and evaluation?

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Agriculture develop a unifying strategy for USDA's nutrition education efforts that (1) identifies ways to improve coordination efforts and strengthen the linkages among the nutrition education efforts and (2) explores options to improve program monitoring and evaluation by collecting reliable data on services and recipients, identifying and disseminating lessons learned, and considering a longer-term evaluation strategy.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-528.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David Bellis at (415) 904-2272 or bellisd@gao.gov.

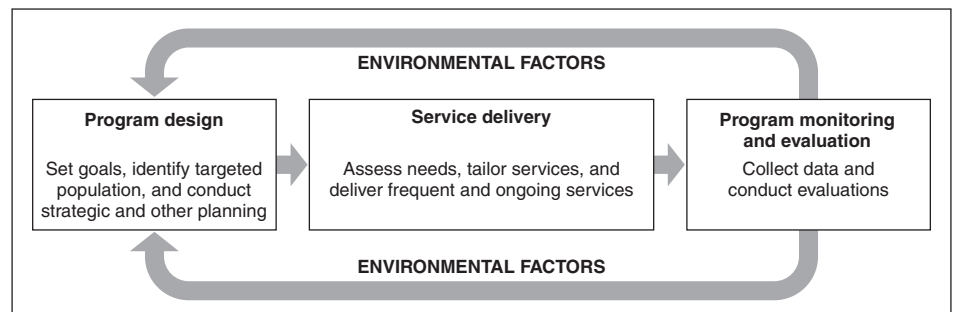
NUTRITION EDUCATION

USDA Provides Services through Multiple Programs, but Stronger Linkages among Efforts Are Needed

What GAO Found

GAO identified several key actions, based on research and performance-based management principles, that increase the likelihood that programs providing nutrition education will achieve their goals. As the figure below shows, examples of these actions include identifying program goals, tailoring services to meet the needs of participants, and collecting data on program results. The actions can be taken during program design, service delivery, and program monitoring and evaluation.

Key Actions That Increase the Likelihood of Successful Nutrition Education



Source: GAO analysis of nutrition education research, performance-based management principles, and expert interviews.

USDA programs providing nutrition education that we reviewed—the Food Stamps Program; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the National School Lunch Program; the Child and Adult Care Food Program; and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program—generally incorporated the key program design actions likely to contribute to success. For example, the USDA programs identified nutrition education goals and target populations. However, the programs' administrative structures hinder coordination among the USDA nutrition education efforts.

We found that the USDA programs incorporated the service delivery actions likely to contribute to successful nutrition education in different ways and to varying extents, but they faced similar challenges that affected their ability to fully incorporate these actions. The challenges included limited resources and systems for providing nutrition education and competing program requirements that took time or resources away from nutrition education. For example, WIC officials said they had limited time for nutrition education because of competing requirements, such as providing information on drug and alcohol counseling.

USDA's nutrition education efforts did not fully incorporate the monitoring and evaluation actions that contribute to success, such as collecting data on the types of nutrition education provided and the outcomes of the efforts. As a result, little is known about what nutrition education is provided and whether these programs have met their nutrition education goals.