



Promoting Healthy Eating: An Investment In the Future

A Report to Congress

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Executive Summary

Promoting Healthy Eating: An Investment in the Future

A Report to Congress

This report fulfills a Congressional request for the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to report on “a comprehensive, integrated approach to nutrition education as a complement to the various nutrition assistance programs.” FNS reviewed its current nutrition education efforts, and consulted with a wide range of nutrition education experts and stakeholders.

Our findings are clear: While the nation’s investment in nutrition assistance is a vitally-important and effective tool in fighting hunger, food insecurity, and related health problems, improving the quality of the American diet remains a major challenge. The prevalence of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity in the FNS target populations exacts a heavy toll in morbidity, mortality, and economic costs due to disease and lost productivity.

Fortunately, nutrition education holds great potential to promote good health and prevent disease. Research confirms that well-designed, behavior-focused interventions can effectively improve diets and nutrition-related behaviors. Federal nutrition assistance programs offer a special opportunity to deliver nutrition and healthy lifestyle messages to those they serve, particularly children. However, critical changes are needed to make program-based nutrition education fully effective in improving nutrition and promoting good health.

Our review of the current state of nutrition education in FNS programs identified the following barriers and opportunities to change that will enhance effectiveness.

Authority and funding levels for nutrition education vary widely by program. Each FNS program has a different nutrition education legislative authority and funding stream. It is important to make nutrition education an integral benefit of all FNS programs.

Flexible authority and a dependable funding stream for nutrition education are needed to support planning, program delivery, integration of services and the ability of the Federal government to provide leadership and technical support.

State and local infrastructures must be developed to deliver integrated, comprehensive programs. The long-term success of Team Nutrition depends on a stable infrastructure for nutrition education delivery; this infrastructure was provided by the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET) before its funding was eliminated. More generally, there is no assurance of a central coordinating point at the State level for nutrition education across and among FNS programs; such coordination is vital for long-term development of an integrated approach.

The evaluation system for FNS nutrition education is fragmented and minimal, and lacks outcome measures. Adequate and reliable data to determine which program components are successful in improving nutrition and food behaviors and related outcomes is essential to permit FNS and its partners to plan effective nutrition education interventions.

The external environment has a fundamental impact on efforts to influence diet-related behavior. Advertising and fast food enterprises, coupled with financial and time constraints in family life, have a powerful effect on the eating and physical activity habits of the American population. It is unrealistic to expect consumer behavior to be consistent with healthy eating goals in an environment that promotes the opposite, unless positive nutrition messages are communicated using similarly effective approaches.

Dietary behaviors are complex, and are motivated by the combined influence of many factors, including personal factors (attitudes and values) and environmental influences (family, workplace, school, grocery stores, community and mass media). Nutrition interventions must deal with the full range of these complex influences. In addition, nutrition education, like other kinds of education, requires a commitment to sustained, consistent and reinforcing messages that can be delivered in multiple ways to an audience over the long term, and with sufficient breadth and depth to compete effectively with countervailing messages and influences.

FNS is working toward a comprehensive nutrition education approach that fulfills its objective of nutrition education that “is fully integrated into all FNS Programs and provides consistent nutrition messages that encourage and motivate target groups to make healthy food and nutrition-related choices throughout the life cycle.”

Stakeholders who provided input for this report identified WIC nutrition education, Food Stamp matching grants to States, and Team Nutrition as

promising pieces of this approach. However, they clearly indicated that NET or a NET-like State program must be fully and consistently funded in order to provide the infrastructure that makes Team Nutrition effective at the local level. The internal review and external input highlight the value of a strengthened policy foundation for nutrition education, and more sustained resource commitments for nutrition education throughout all programs. These discussions identified:

1. **Develop a Funding Mechanism that Supports Sustained Nutrition Education for All Programs.** Adequate infrastructure and capacity is critical to equip Federal, State and local agencies to plan, develop and implement effective interventions. One component of an adequate funding structure is to restore the appropriation for NET, and increase its authorization level to reflect inflation since the 1977 authorization.
2. **Authorize Funding for Cross-Program Coordination.** By using a small portion of Federal program resources for cross-program initiatives, FNS could better reach target populations. This flexibility would give FNS an opportunity to structure a cross-program effort to motivate partners to maintain high-quality, better coordinated nutrition education across FNS programs. Grants to State agencies should be used to support development of long-term nutrition education plans and foster better national, state, and local coordination.
3. **Clearly authorize use of FNS program nutrition education funds for efforts directed to FNS target populations.** Eligible individuals cycle in and out of program participation, making sustained efforts offered to participants alone problematic. FNS should be authorized to use some funding for nutrition education directed at the FNS *target population*, rather than restrict efforts to active program participants.
4. **Expand Reach of Nutrition Education by Offering State Incentives.** Federal-State-local funding partnerships can increase investment in nutrition education and spur private contributions. FNS should be permitted to provide incentives to expand nutrition education services, and to reach FNS target populations.
5. **Authorize Grants for Nutrition Education Focusing on Special Populations.** While integrated cross-program strategies are necessary to improve diets across eligible populations, some populations, such as Native Americans, face dietary problems and

needs that require more specialized intervention; special investments are required in these areas.

6. Leverage Federal Resources with Public-Private

Partnerships. With the authority to enter into financial partnerships with business and private non-profit entities, FNS can take advantage of the potential connections between encouraging healthy dietary behaviors and such efforts as promotion of American agricultural products, mutually reinforcing both endeavors.

7. Invest in Improved Evaluation and Reporting for Nutrition

Education. A system for routinely collecting useful data to improve the planning, management, and outcomes of nutrition education activities should be developed and implemented. USDA should also make ongoing investment in studies to supplement this reporting, and should evaluate social marketing strategies and nutrition education outcomes.

8. Invest in Nutrition Education for the General Population.

FNS' target populations are unlikely to improve their nutritional lifestyle if the general population is not also making improvements. Federal structures, in particular USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), the Human Nutrition Coordinating Committee, and HHS's Nutrition Policy Board, are in place to provide leadership; funding should be adequate to ensure that these efforts make an impact in the context of broad environmental influences on nutrition and physical activity.

Enhancing the nation's investment in nutrition education represents a prime opportunity to improve diets and promote good health. The needed changes in nutrition behaviors can best be achieved through a sustained, integrated, long-term nutrition education effort that:

- ensures program infrastructure and capacity to support delivery of ongoing and multifaceted nutrition education to program constituencies;
- makes nutrition education an integral component of all FNS programs; and
- allows flexibility for integrated, cross-program interventions.

Promoting Healthy Eating: An Investment in the Future

A Report to Congress

Introduction

This report fulfills the request from Congress accompanying the Agriculture Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2000, P.L. 106-78, which directs the USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to provide a report on a comprehensive, integrated approach to nutrition education. In the request from Congress, the Appropriations Committee:

“Directs the agency to prepare and submit a report to the Committee no later than January 1, 2000 that describes a comprehensive, integrated approach to nutrition education as a complement to the various nutrition assistance programs. Such a report should highlight the aspects of current programs such as Team Nutrition, the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET) and other school-based nutrition programs to be included in an integrated program. The report should also identify gaps in current programs and approaches as well as potential funding sources and solutions. This report is to be developed in close consultation with other government agencies such as the Department of Education, Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other organizations including the American Dietetic Association, the Society for Nutrition Education, the National Association of State NET coordinators and the American School Food Service Association.”

Development Process

In accordance with Congressional direction, FNS consulted with Federal health agencies and professional nutrition organizations in developing this report. On November 4, 1999, FNS convened a Nutrition Education Consultation Meeting to solicit input from the government agencies and professional nutrition organizations specified by Congress, as well as other partners. Background materials on FNS nutrition education funding and activities were provided to each attendee prior to the meeting. Attendees were asked to identify :

- Opportunities for better coordination and integration of nutrition education within and across programs;
- Needed improvements in the overall approach to nutrition education for the FNS target populations;
- Barriers to implementing the improvements or capitalizing on opportunities (include administrative, regulatory, funding and other barriers); and
- Ideas for practical, innovative solutions.

This process provided excellent input on FNS nutrition education issues from a range of experts in the field. Their ideas helped the Agency in assessing the barriers and framing potential solutions, as presented in this report.

The Importance of Nutrition Education

The nation's investment in nutrition assistance has been a critical tool in fighting undernutrition and related health problems. Today, it is well established that good nutrition is fundamental to proper growth, development, health and performance. Diet is widely recognized as a central component of health promotion and disease prevention.

But while we have made progress in promoting food security and fighting hunger, we face a continuing challenge in improving the quality of the American diet. Poor nutrition and lack of physical activity account for 300,000 deaths per year, second only to tobacco as a cause of preventable mortality.¹ The economic cost of poor nutrition contributing to coronary heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes—four of the ten leading causes of death—is now \$71 billion per year, and the growing childhood obesity epidemic is likely to result in a dramatic increase in this cost over time.¹ Research also suggests that diets during pregnancy and early childhood can have long-term impacts on child and adult health. Consumption of a healthy diet in the early years is essential for normal growth and development, and to prevent a variety of nutrition-related health problems, such as iron-deficiency anemia, growth retardation, malnutrition, compromised cognitive achievement, obesity, dental caries, and chronic diseases later in life.

Nutrition education is a key strategy for changing behaviors that lead to reaching health goals. Research also confirms that properly designed and implemented nutrition education interventions, focusing on achieving behavioral change, can be effective at improving diets and nutrition-related behaviors.³ Healthy People 2010 recognizes nutrition as an important factor in the prevention of premature deaths from the chronic diseases described above and sets numerous nutrition objectives including an increase in the proportion of schools that provide nutrition education in school curricula².

¹ McGinnis, MJ. and Foegen, WH. *Actual Causes of Death in the United States*. JAMA, 270:2207-2212, 1993.

¹ Frazao, Elizabeth. "High Costs of Poor Eating Patterns in the United States," in E. Frazao (ed.) *America's Eating Habits: Changes and Consequences*. USDA Economic Research Service, 1999.

³ Contento, Isobel, "The Effectiveness of Nutrition Education and Implications for Nutrition Education Policy, Programs, and Research: A Review of Research," *Journal of Nutrition Education*, July, 1996.

² *Healthy People 2010 Objectives: Draft for Public Comment September, 1998*.

State of Current Nutrition Education Services in FNS Programs

FNS nutrition assistance programs touch the lives of one in six Americans each year, making a tremendous difference in the lives of children and low-income populations by promoting food security and reducing hunger. These programs also represent an extraordinary opportunity to reach participants with nutrition and healthy lifestyle messages, particularly children who participate during their formative years. As FNS programs successfully increase the amount of nutritious food available to at-risk-groups, they also hold a great, but largely untapped, potential to influence food choices and support healthy eating and related nutrition behaviors.

FNS has developed a variety of materials using the principles of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the *Food Guide Pyramid* for delivery of consistent, up-to-date messages to support State and local efforts. Although materials may be made available at cost across program lines, the materials have generally been developed for use in specific programs. Resource constraints limit the Agency's ability to assure appropriate use of the materials or integration into cross program efforts.

The Food Stamp Program (FSP)

The **Food Stamp Program** enables low income families to purchase nutritious foods at retail stores with coupons or electronic-based benefits. There is no legislative mandate for nutrition education, but States are encouraged to provide nutrition messages that focus on reinforcing the link between food security and a healthy diet by providing nutrition training, information and material to eligible at-risk-households. States that have an approved nutrition education plan can be reimbursed for 50 percent of State and local expenditures. Since fiscal year 1993, the number of States with approved plans has risen from 7 to 46, but programs vary widely in content and intensity. Most States contract with USDA's Cooperative Extension System for actual delivery of nutrition education.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

The **WIC Program** provides supplemental food, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant, breastfeeding and postpartum women, infants and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk. Nutrition education services are legislatively mandated, requiring that each State expend at least 1/6 of its Nutrition Services and Administration funding on nutrition education. An additional spending target is required for

breastfeeding promotion and support. States are required to ensure that nutrition education is made available to all participants. Federal and State program managers are currently seeking to reinvigorate basic WIC nutrition education services which did not receive as much developmental emphasis during the rapid expansion of program participation and breastfeeding promotion in the 1990's.

Child Nutrition Programs (CN)

The **Child Nutrition Programs** provide meals and snacks to the nation's children through the National School Lunch, School Breakfast, Special Milk, Summer Food Service, After School Snacks, and Child and Adult Care Food Programs. Nutrition education in the Child Nutrition Programs is designed to be supported through two complementary, integrated mechanisms -- the **Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET)** and **Team Nutrition**. NET has provided support for the State and local infrastructure to deliver nutrition education at schools and child care settings participating in the Child Nutrition Programs. Team Nutrition is a strategy for incorporating behavior-based messages into new materials for use in NET and other community-based initiatives that target children.

Team Nutrition develops the messages and materials, and provides training to States. The NET Program funds the State and local infrastructure to use these materials to deliver nutrition education for children at the local level.

Team Nutrition establishes a national model that encourages use of multiple, reinforcing channels of communication to reach children and their caregivers with targeted nutrition education messages. The NET staff and infrastructure have used materials designed by Team Nutrition and begun to follow the Team Nutrition communications strategy. Without the NET Program, there is no delivery mechanism for either national Child Nutrition initiatives like Team Nutrition or more localized approaches and projects. Although NET continues to be authorized at 50 cents per enrolled child to provide State grants for the infrastructure needed to coordinate nutrition education activities in CN Programs, no federal funding is currently provided. A NET-like infrastructure continues to exist only to the extent that States provide the funding.

The Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)

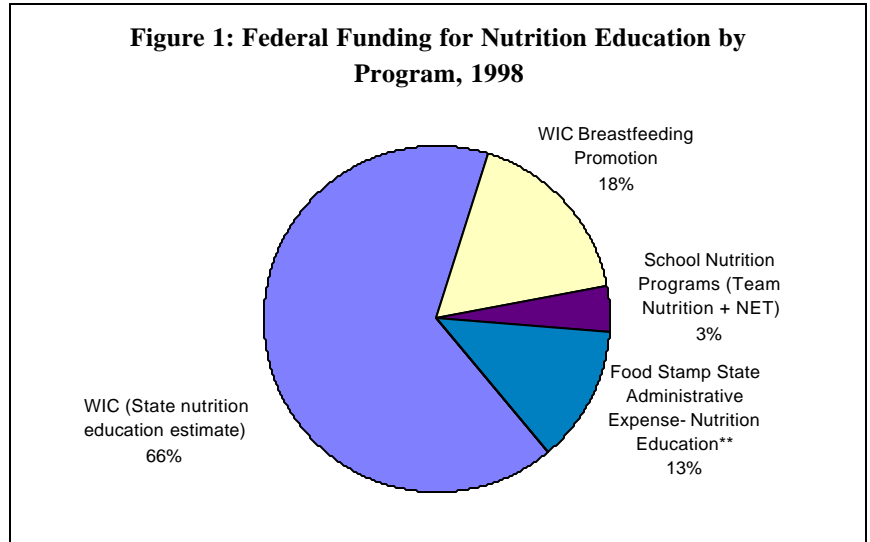
The **FDPIR Program** provides supplemental foods to low-income households living on Indian reservations and in designated areas near reservations. FNS has identified nutrition education as a high priority for FDPIR, given the high incidence of diet-related health conditions among Native Americans. Since 1993, a modest level of funding for FDPIR nutrition activities has been established and used primarily to hire and train nutrition education aides.

The Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)

The **CSFP** provides pregnant women, new mothers, infants, children up to age 6, and elderly people with nutritious USDA commodity foods. CSFP has authorization to use administrative funds for nutrition education, and such activities are mandatory. In actual practice, the intensity and content of nutrition education vary widely by locality.

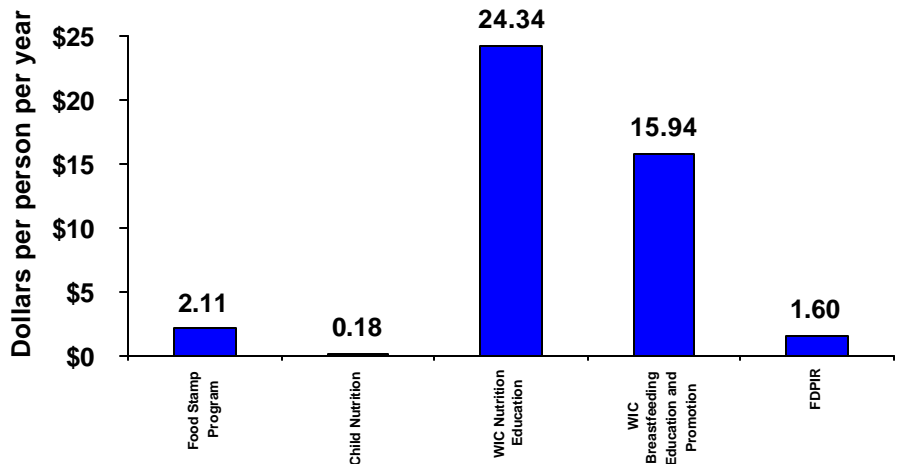
Funding Disparities

Figure 1 illustrates the wide variation in funding for nutrition education between the various nutrition assistance programs. The 1998 funding for FNS nutrition education totaled \$324 million.



The varying level of program commitment and expenditure for nutrition education per person is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: FNS Nutrition Education Expenditures, 1998
Annual Average Per Person Federal Expenditures



These funding disparities reflect the level of support for service to the millions of participants served by the FNS programs. Table 1 shows participation in major FNS programs in fiscal year 1999. FNS estimates that approximately 1 out of every 6 Americans participates in at least one FNS program.

FNS Program	Participation (millions)
Food Stamp Program (FSP)	18.2
Child Nutrition Programs:	
National School Lunch Program (NSLP)	26.9
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	7.3
Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP)	2.6
Summer Food Service Program (SFSP)	2.2
Special Milk Program (SMP)	0.5
Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)	7.3
Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)	0.4
Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR)	0.1
Nutrition Program for the Elderly (NPE)	0.5

The Foundation for Coordinated Nutrition Education

USDA has long recognized the importance of nutrition education and the need to develop new strategies as food products, life styles and eating habits change. The 1996 *State of Nutrition Education at USDA: A Report to the Secretary* describes a comprehensive approach to nutrition education for the Department.³ It states USDA's overall goal for nutrition education as :

"To provide an integrated nutrition education program that contributes to a nutritionally knowledgeable public, motivated to make behavioral change(s) to promote optimal health and nutritional status."

While all 14 recommendations from the 1996 report are applicable to FNS efforts (see Figure 3), the third is the most directly relevant to this report: "Put Nutrition Education into All USDA Food Programs." To respond to the recommendations, FNS has expanded work with its State partners in five major areas:

- It has reframed the FNS programs as "nutrition assistance programs" to emphasize the importance of nutrition as an essential component of the programs.
- It has strengthened nutrition services within the agency by placing at least one qualified nutritionist in each of the four major program areas (Food Stamps, Child Nutrition, WIC and Food Distribution), and restructuring a technical nutrition group into a core nutrition unit located in a staff office that reports to the agency head. This core nutrition unit has responsibility for coordinating nutrition education policy across all FNS programs, and coordinating FNS nutrition education with other nutrition education providers.

³ The State of Nutrition Education in USDA: A Report to the Secretary. Submitted to the Secretary by the State of Nutrition Education in USDA working group. Facilitator/Coordinator: Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. October 1996.

- It has revised its strategic plan to consolidate nutrition objectives for all FNS programs under a single goal, with measurable indicators of nutrition improvement by FNS target populations.
- It has worked actively with State partners and the Cooperative Extension System to leverage Federal funding with increased State contributions for nutrition education for the Food Stamp-eligible low-income population.
- It has encouraged adoption of the Team Nutrition behavior-based strategies in the Child Nutrition Programs by developing new materials, providing training grants to states, evaluating pilot communities, and developing a multi-state demonstration project.

**Figure 3: *State of Nutrition
Education in USDA: A Report to the Secretary*
Recommendations for Consideration**

1. Make nutrition education a priority.
2. Reach out to all Americans.
3. Put nutrition education into all USDA food programs.
4. Link with constituencies.
5. Nurture partnerships and coalitions.
6. State behavioral change as an objective.
7. Evaluate all projects.
8. Refocus training.
9. Refocus research.
10. Make information on USDA's nutrition education activities electronically accessible.
11. Follow-up with reports.
12. Publish and share project information.
13. Sponsor cross-program meetings.
14. Explore alternative financing.

Facing Challenges, Breaking Down Barriers, Building on Strengths

While the critical advances in nutrition education described above represent necessary prerequisites for a comprehensive integrated approach, more needs to be done to achieve the integration necessary to realize the desired health outcomes.

Drawing upon the input from a wide range of nutrition education experts, FNS identified a set of gaps and barriers that, if properly addressed, could make significant progress in promoting healthy eating and other nutrition-related behaviors among the FNS target populations. In general, these key gaps and barriers relate to two broad areas: 1) legislative authority designating nutrition education as a benefit in all nutrition assistance programs, and 2) the need for stable resources to maintain infrastructure and update program activities in response to changes in technology and client needs.

It is important to recognize in any discussion of challenges, the fundamental impact of the external environment on any social marketing effort, particularly a nutrition education strategy. Advertising and fast food enterprises, coupled with the financial and time constraints in family life, have a very powerful effect on the eating and physical activity habits of the American population. Food manufacturers now invest more in a single year on commercial promotions of sales of food products, \$7 billion⁶, than the government has invested in nutrition education since creation of the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* in 1980. It is unrealistic to expect consumer behavior to be consistent with national nutrition goals in an environment that provides a barrage of messages that encourage behavior inconsistent with these goals.

No combination of demonstration projects or transient interventions can succeed in achieving and sustaining the lifelong behavioral changes needed to ensure good nutrition. An ongoing investment that reinforces the importance of nutrition education is essential to counter the external environment, and lessen the impact of constraints in people's personal lives that have been moving the general population

⁶ Gallo, Anthony. "Food Advertising in the United States," in E. Frazao (ed.) *America's Eating Habits: Changes and Consequences*. USDA Economic Research Service, 1999.

towards a less nutritious eating pattern and less active lifestyle.

Legislative Authority

Nutrition education should be clearly incorporated into the legislative requirements for each FNS program.

Each FNS program has a different nutrition education legislative authority and funding stream. WIC is the only major program that authorizes nutrition education as an actual program benefit. It is important to make nutrition education an integral benefit of all FNS programs. Such a change would have particular impact on the Food Stamp, Child Nutrition and household commodity program participants, and could result in declines in health care costs.

Resources

Flexible funding authority and a dependable funding stream for nutrition education are needed to support planning, program delivery, integration of services and the ability of the Federal government to provide leadership and technical support.

Stable funding holds great potential to support and strengthen an effective long-term comprehensive, integrated approach to nutrition education, and is essential to fostering partnerships at the State and local levels. The Child Nutrition Programs serve more participants than any other FNS program, but uneven funding and severe drops in funding from year to year, particularly in the NET Program, have decreased the capacity of USDA, States, and local agencies to deliver effective nutrition education to children.

State and local infrastructures must be developed to deliver integrated, comprehensive programs.

Without dependable or sustainable funding for NET, the Federal, State, and local infrastructure necessary for the delivery of Team Nutrition strategies for children, their parents, teachers, food service personnel, school administrators, community partners and local media, is left to the discretion and expense of State agencies. The effectiveness and long-term success of Team Nutrition depends on a stable infrastructure for nutrition education delivery.

In addition, a central point is required in each State with

responsibility for cross-program coordination of nutrition education efforts. Because FNS nutrition assistance programs are administered by various State agencies, coordination and collaboration among agencies is a vital requirement for long-term development of an integrated approach.

The evaluation system for FNS nutrition education is fragmented and minimal, and lacks outcome measures.

Planning of effective nutrition education interventions in the short- and long-term depends on adequate and reliable data to determine which program components over time are successful in producing improvements in nutrition and food behaviors and related outcomes. The importance of strong evaluation to nutrition education success was a key conclusion of a 1995 FNS conference, “Charting the Course for Evaluation: How Do We Measure the Success of Nutrition Education and Promotion in Food Assistance Programs?”. The ability to conduct evaluations is continually challenged by limits on funds allocated for that purpose.

FNS Nutrition Education: Creating a Healthier America

Promoting healthy eating and nutrition-related behavior is the central goal of improved nutrition. The programs administered by the FNS represent a vitally-important mechanism for improving the Nation's nutrition practices. These Programs are targeted to populations experiencing a disproportionate share of diet-related problems, and often facing disadvantages, including barriers to the educational resources that support behavior change, Federal nutrition assistance offers one of the Nation's best opportunities to improve dietary practices in ways that promote health and well-being.

FNS Nutrition Education Objective

“Nutrition Education is fully integrated into all FNS Programs and provides consistent nutrition messages that encourage and motivate target groups to make healthy food and nutrition-related choices throughout the life cycle.”

Achieving success in this area, however, is not easy. FNS and its partners must identify and support the most effective educational strategies available, and must recognize the unique role and structure of these programs in improving the nutritional status of those they serve. FNS's objective for nutrition education is to make use of the programs' ability to reach those most in need, and to reach them with state-of-the-art nutrition education interventions that can effectively change behavior. Making this objective a reality requires attention to the following principles:

Successful education interventions are based on models of behavior change that recognize the influence of multiple factors—personal factors (attitudes and values), and environmental influences (family, workplace, school, grocery stores, community and mass media)—on behavioral choices. Nutrition intervention can be successful only by taking into account the complexity of these influences, and using a combination of strategies from each level of influence to produce lasting behavior change.

Team Nutrition is an example of an FNS nutrition intervention strategy targeted for school-aged children based on these behavior-oriented strategies. The approach encompasses six communications channels, including: 1) food service initiatives

which provide training and technical assistance for CN food service professionals to help them serve healthier meals, 2) classroom activities which incorporate nutrition education into the school curriculum, 3) reinforcing messages sent home to parents, 4) involvement of the entire school and school environment in healthy, active events, 5) involvement of the community in nutrition-related events, and 6) media coverage and message development.

The Evaluation of the Nutrition Education and Training Program indicated that NET was successful in increasing children's acceptance of nutritious foods, improving teachers' knowledge of the principles and practices of nutrition education and using the school dining room as a learning laboratory for nutrition education. The area where NET was found to fall short was a continuing need for curricula and materials with a multidisciplinary focus involving teachers, food service personnel and administrators.⁷ Team Nutrition has allowed FNS to address this shortcoming. The multidisciplinary strategy of Team Nutrition has recently demonstrated positive impacts on students' eating behavior.⁸

Team Nutrition develops messages, materials, and policies consistent with current scientific theories on nutrition communication and behavior change. These are made available to the NET staff and other partners for delivery to the target audiences throughout the country. Institutionalization of Team Nutrition to reach schools and communities depends on training and support at the State and local levels through infrastructure provided by the NET program.

Successful efforts must reach their target populations with sustained interventions over the long-term. Nutrition and health specialists recognize that the development, maintenance, and change of eating patterns are determined not only by individual factors but also by many social, cultural, and environmental influences.⁹

Therefore, achievement of a comprehensive, integrated nutrition education approach requires long-term efforts. Nutrition

⁷ St. Pierre, Robert. *An Evaluation of the Nutrition Education and Training Program*. Abt Associates, 1981.

⁸ USDA Food and Nutrition Service. *The Story of Team Nutrition: Pilot Study Outcome Report*. 1998.

⁹ Owen, A.L.; Splett, PL; Owen, GO; *Nutrition in the Community: The Art and Science of Delivering Services*; 4th Edition, McGraw-Hill. 1998.

education, like other forms of education, must be ongoing, continuous and sustainable as nutrition science changes and the target population evolves.

Key among the components of a comprehensive approach is sustained and sufficient funding. In addition to the current funding of FNS nutrition education (including the School Meals Initiative/Team Nutrition), a continued flow of sufficient funding is needed to support State infrastructure, program development and a social marketing campaign disseminating consistent messages. To be effective, the investment must support long-term repeated exposure through multiple channels to reinforce behaviorally-focused messages at an intensity that can reasonably compete in the marketplace. Partnerships with private industry can help leverage the investment, and an organized structure of agencies (Federal, State and local) is required to foster interagency collaboration and partnerships to ensure adoption and continued application of these strategies.

To be successfully integrated into nutrition assistance programs, nutrition education efforts must take advantage of the layered structure of these programs.

Educational activities must be designed to take full advantage of the differing roles of local, State, and Federal agencies in administering and delivering quality programs. States are positioned to identify State and local needs, foster interagency collaborations, and support local service capacity and quality assurance. Since FNS programs are administrated by various agencies within each State, coordination is vital to promoting an integrated approach.

Support of statewide planning and coordination would facilitate development of long-term, coordinated nutrition education plans, and sustainable infrastructures, for FNS programs that carry messages from the national level to the community level and address unique State and local issues. State officials, and/or State Coordinating Councils, should be identified to provide leadership and a process for cross-program coordination among FNS-sponsored programs, as well as foster cooperation and collaboration with other Federal and State initiatives.

Creating an Environment for Change

Improving the design and delivery of nutrition education holds great potential for achieving significant improvement in dietary practices for FNS program participants. The consultations FNS initiated with key stakeholders generated many creative and practical ideas that we can and will incorporate into our current program strategies. However, the most meaningful changes and improvements must come through strengthening the policy foundations for nutrition education, and securing more sustained resource commitments. Therefore, the potential solutions in this report focus on these areas.

Potential Solutions

1. Develop a Funding Mechanism that Supports Sustained Nutrition Education for all Programs.

Adequate infrastructure and capacity at the Federal, State and local levels is critical for agencies to plan, develop and implement comprehensive and integrated nutrition education interventions. These efforts must go beyond organizational issues to build fiscal, technical, programmatic and structural capacity. Of the four major FNS program categories--Food Stamps, WIC, Child Nutrition and Commodities-- the latter two would particularly benefit from increased nutrition education funding relative to the size of the food benefits provided and populations served.

One important component of an effective funding structure is to restore the appropriation for NET, and increase its authorization level to reflect inflation since the 1977 authorization. Over the last 10 years, the inconsistency of NET funding levels has complicated the coordination and long term planning of nutrition education services. While Team Nutrition has made available many creative nutrition education resources to State and local government, implementation is limited. Stakeholders have indicated that full implementation of these programs requires restoration of stable NET Program funding needed to support State and local infrastructure. Without the infrastructure supported by NET, States face diminished capacities to conduct programs and to perform the vital leadership functions of assessment; policy development and quality assurance needed to promote implementation.

2. Authorize Funding for Cross-Program Coordination.

Authorize funding and allow flexibility at the Federal level for pooling a small portion of program resources to support cross-program, integrated initiatives. Such flexibility would give FNS an opportunity to structure a cross-program framework for nutrition education including support materials, technical assistance and training. This funding and flexibility would facilitate effective cross-program coordination to reach the target population where they live, work, learn, and play, and motivate partners to maintain high-quality nutrition education components within and across FNS-sponsored programs for children and families.

Authorize and fund FNS to provide grants to State agencies, including Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and Territories, to facilitate development of long-term coordinated nutrition education plans (5 years), and to permit ongoing coordination of messages from the national effort to the State and local agencies and their partners.

3. Clearly authorize use of FNS program nutrition education funds for efforts directed towards the FNS target populations.

Eligible individuals cycle into and out of program participation, making sustained efforts offered to participants alone problematic. Accordingly, legislation should clearly authorize use of a limited amount of the FNS program funds for nutrition education directed at the FNS *target population*, rather than restrict efforts to active program participants. This flexibility would allow State and local agencies to employ multilevel and multifaceted nutrition education approaches directed to the children and low-income groups served by FNS programs. Furthermore, such flexibility would foster more comprehensive, community-based approaches that could have a multiplying effect by generating local and private support.

The current authorizing legislation for nutrition education in FNS programs varies in specific wording and intent across the programs. For example, WIC legislation requires that at least 1/6 of the funding for nutrition services and administration be spent on nutrition education for the WIC-eligible population and requires offering of nutrition education to participants.

CSFP mandates nutrition education, but does not specify a minimum funding level. In other programs the provision of nutrition education is discretionary. Child Nutrition Programs allow use of the funding for State Administrative Expense (SAE) for nutrition education, and authorize funding for the Nutrition Education and Training Program (NET) and the School Meals Initiative (SMI). However, with limited SAE funding and without an appropriation for NET, actual expenditures are largely limited to the SMI funding. Food Stamp Program (FSP) legislation allows for FNS to reimburse State and local expenditures at 50% of their cost for nutrition education for the FSP target population.

A review of the existing legislative authority and program performance history of interactions with State and local partners indicates that funding incentives and increased flexibility in using authority to support an integrated approach can greatly foster the commitment and support needed for nutrition education.

4. Expand Reach of Nutrition Education by Offering State Incentives.

Authorize FNS to reimburse 50% of State and local expenditures for targeted nutrition education (50:50 Federal/non-Federal match) to provide incentives to expand nutrition education services above and beyond current State and local initiatives. Experience demonstrates that Federal-State-Local funding partnerships can increase the investment in nutrition education and spur private contributions as evidenced by the growth of State agency Nutrition Plans with the Food Stamp Program shared Federal/non-Federal investment.

Matching funding would also help to expand the reach of nutrition education services to effect behavior change in the FNS target populations.

5. Authorize Grants for Nutrition Education Focusing on Special Populations.

While integrated cross-program strategies are necessary to improve diets across eligible populations, some populations face dietary problems and needs that require more specialized intervention. This investment would represent a commitment to a healthier America in the Twenty- First Century and the National Healthy People 2010 goal of eliminating health disparities in ethnically, economically, and culturally diverse special populations.¹⁰ In addition, these resources would promote development of innovative approaches, provide additional support for capacity building activities, as well as ongoing operational and evaluation costs required to ensure delivery and coordination of high quality approaches.

6. Leverage Federal Resources with Public-Private Partnerships.

By offering opportunities for collaboration and multiplying the impact of scarce Federal resources, partnerships with the business and private non-profit communities hold great potential to broaden the reach and increase the effectiveness of Federal nutrition education efforts.

Providing FNS with the authority to enter into financial partnerships with business and private non-profit entities can allow the Agency to take advantage of the potential connections between encouraging healthy dietary behaviors and such efforts as promotion of American agricultural products, mutually reinforcing both endeavors.

7. Invest in an Improved System of Evaluation and Regular Reporting for Nutrition Education.

FNS should take the lead in working with the State and local agencies in all of the FNS programs and other experienced partners to develop and implement a system for routinely collecting useful data to improve the planning, management, and outcomes of nutrition education activities. USDA should plan for ongoing investment in studies to support and improve the reporting effort, and to evaluate social marketing strategies and the outcomes of FNS nutrition education.

¹⁰ *Healthy People 2010 Objectives: Draft for Public Comment: September, 1998*

8. Invest in Nutrition Education for the General Population

Stated simply, people tend to “go with the flow.” The target population of the FNS programs cannot reasonably be expected to improve their nutritional lifestyle if the trend for the general U.S. population is not also towards significant improvement. Federal structures, in particular the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP), the USDA Human Nutrition Coordinating Committee and the HHS Nutrition Policy Board, are in place to provide leadership in this effort. However, adequate Federal funding for nutrition education for the general population is an essential component of an overall strategy that supports dietary improvements for those served by FNS programs. Such funding should be provided at a level that can make a real impact in the context of today’s food marketplace and other broad environmental influences on nutrition and physical activity.

A Sustained Nutrition Education Effort is Needed

Enhancing the nations investment in nutrition education represents a prime opportunity to promote food security, avoid preventable deaths, eliminate nutrition-related health disparities, and reduce the potential societal cost of the obesity epidemic. The needed changes in nutrition behaviors can only be achieved through a sustained, integrated, long-term nutrition education effort that:

- ensures program infrastructure and capacity at all levels to support delivery of ongoing and multifaceted nutrition education to program constituencies;
- makes nutrition education an integral component of all FNS programs; and
- allows flexibility for integrated, cross-program interventions.