

# Food Stamp Nutrition Education Guiding Principles

## Introduction:

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Stamp Program (FSP) provides nutrition assistance benefits to eligible low-income households that can be used to purchase foods from authorized food retailers, thereby providing a food security safety net. When Congress created the FSP in the early 1960's, it envisioned a program that provided households with access to a healthy, nutritious diet. Today, as this FSP has grown into the largest Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) nutrition assistance program, that goal remains central to its mission and purpose.

FNS encourages and supports nutrition education designed to help food stamp participants and eligibles choose healthy foods and active lifestyles. Under current regulations, State FSP agencies have the option to provide, as part of their administrative operations, nutrition education for persons who are eligible for the Program. States must submit an annual plan to FNS for approval; FNS then reimburses States for 50 percent of the allowable expenditures for nutrition education, comparable to the rate FNS provides for other administrative functions.

State FSP agencies contract with Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES), State Departments of Health or Education, and State-level nutrition networks or others to provide nutrition education services to the target audience. In 1992, seven State agencies had approved food stamp nutrition education (FSNE) plans; this has grown to include fifty-two State agencies in 2004. Federal funds approved for FSNE grew from \$661,000 in 1992 to over \$228 million in 2004.

The growing interest in providing nutrition education as part of the FSP is supported by clear evidence of need. A USDA study from 2000 indicates many low-income adults do not know specific facts related to what types of dietary practices are healthful, such as what specific foods they should eat to maintain a healthy diet.<sup>1</sup> More recently, attention has focused on providing nutrition education and services to address the rising epidemic of overweight and obesity in America. Here, too, the need is great -- for example, approximately 65% of adults in America and 16% of children and adolescents are overweight<sup>2</sup>—putting them at risk for serious health problems including heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and some cancers.

Low-income households have a higher prevalence of health conditions related to poor nutrition than households with higher incomes. Women with lower family income levels are 50% more likely to be obese than those with higher family incomes. Children of overweight mothers are more likely to be overweight themselves by age 6 than children of lean mothers.<sup>3</sup> And, while obesity rates have doubled in children and tripled in adolescents over the last two decades, they have increased the most among those in the lowest income levels, especially African American and Mexican American children.<sup>4 5 6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gleason P, Rangarajan A, Olson C. Dietary Intake and Dietary Attitudes Among Food Stamp Participants and Other Low-Income Individuals. USDA, September 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Health, United States, 2003, Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC.

<sup>3</sup> Berkowitz RI, Stallings VA, Maislin G, Stunkard AJ. Growth of children at high risk for obesity during the first 6 y of life: implication for prevention. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2005; 81:140-6.

<sup>4</sup> The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent and decrease Overweight and Obesity 2001, U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Rockville, MD.

<sup>5</sup> Ogden CL, Flegal KM, Carroll MD, Johnson CL. Prevalence and trends in overweight among US children and adolescents, 1999-2000. *JAMA* 288: 1728-32. 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Health, United States, 2002, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC

The Guiding Principles in this document articulate FNS' vision for FSNE and address the nutrition concerns and food budget constraints faced by FSP eligibles. While these Guiding Principles establish standards of excellence for FSNE, the State Nutrition Education Plan Guidance provides the detailed policy that governs FSNE operations. Together, these documents are key resources for States that provide FSNE.

These Guiding Principles recognize that achieving and sustaining positive change in eating and nutrition-related behaviors is a complex challenge involving a dynamic interplay between factors that include individual characteristics; physical, social, cultural contexts and the larger social processes.<sup>7</sup> Consistent nutrition education messages need to be communicated through multiple channels that reach people where they live, work, learn and play in order to have an effect on this multiplicity of factors.

## **Guiding Principles:**

### **1. Food Stamp Nutrition Education is intended for food stamp participants and individuals eligible for the Food Stamp Program.**

This FSNE principle supports the overall goal of the FSP which is to provide eligible low-income households with nutrition benefits to ensure that they have access to an adequate diet. FNS defines FSP eligibles as persons that meet criteria for participation in the FSP as described in Federal legislation and regulations. Persons that participate in the formal FSP certification process (e.g., FSP participants) are the only persons known with certainty to meet criteria for participation in the program. As such, FSP participants, who currently number over 25 million of the nation's neediest people, are at the core of FSNE efforts. Because persons eligible for the FSP may participate in the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) in lieu of the FSP, FDPIR participants are considered as participating in the FSP and may receive FSNE.

Many persons are eligible for food stamp benefits but do not participate. FNS is committed to providing FSP eligibles with the opportunity to receive nutrition education. The Agency has determined that a household income of  $\leq 130\%$  of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) is generally a reasonable eligibility proxy for the purpose of receiving FSNE. For example, participation in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program is a reasonable proxy for food stamp eligibility as it concerns FSNE. Persons typically ineligible for the FSP (i.e., incarcerated persons, boarders, etc.) are exceptions to this proxy criterion.

Furthermore, certain settings offer a high likelihood of reaching Program eligibles and are appropriate locations for FSNE delivery. When FSNE is delivered through the following venues, waivers to the FSP exclusivity rule are not required.

- Food Stamp/TANF offices
- Public Housing Sites
- Food Banks
- Job readiness or training programs for FSP/TANF recipients

States may deliver FSNE to Program eligibles through other venues if 1) the audience meets the general low-income standard (i.e.  $> 50\%$  of persons have household incomes of  $\leq 185\%$  of the FPG) and 2) they

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<sup>7</sup> Promoting Health, Intervention Strategies from Social and Behavioral Research. Institute of Medicine, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C. 2000. p. 283.

have an approved exclusivity waiver. Examples of such venues may include schools, child care centers, Summer Food Service Program sites, community centers, and grocery stores. FSNE State Plan Guidance will explain the required documentation needed for venues requiring a waiver. For any other venue than those previously described, States must prorate FSNE's share of the total cost based on the estimated number of FSP eligibles that may receive the nutrition education. Details pertaining to cost accounting are described in the State Nutrition Education Plan Guidance.

**2. Food Stamp Nutrition Education is a set of learning experiences designed to facilitate the voluntary adoption of eating and other nutrition-related behaviors conducive to health and well being for those on a limited budget.**

This is based on a widely accepted definition of nutrition education,<sup>8 9</sup> modified to qualify that nutrition education for FSP eligibles considers their limited budgets and resources. Specifically, it emphasizes how Program eligibles can efficiently utilize their food resources, including food stamp benefits and as appropriate other FNS nutrition assistance programs, to facilitate consistent access to nutritious foods.

**3. Food Stamp Nutrition Education has the greatest potential impact on the nutrition-related behaviors of the overall food stamp population when it targets women and children in food stamp eligible households.**

Despite an increasing investment in FSNE, budgeted State and Federal funds for FSNE totaled less than \$19.00 per FSP participant in FY 2004. To get the most out of this modest investment, FNS encourages States to focus their resources on changing the nutrition-related behaviors of key subsets of the food stamp population. Specifically, FNS encourages targeting first, women and then children in households participating in the FSP.

Women are viewed as gatekeepers of what food is purchased. The grocery industry reports that 69% of primary shoppers are female heads of household.<sup>10</sup> A recent survey by the American Dietetic Association Foundation reports on the key role, mothers have as models for their children's eating habits.<sup>11</sup> Parents point out that children and teenage youth affect family grocery and meal choices.<sup>12</sup> Together, mothers and their children make or influence food purchases and meal decisions.

Targeting FSNE to these two groups captures a majority of food stamp recipients. In FY 2003, 21% of food stamp participants, or almost five million, were women living in households with children. An additional 51% of participants were children. Further targeting may be necessary to ensure nutrition education has sufficient intensity.

FNS recognizes that women with children are also targeted, to varying degrees, by WIC and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). This shared targeting provides an opportunity to reinforce and build upon nutrition education messages across programs using multiple

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<sup>8</sup> Green LW, Kreuter MW. Health promotion planning: an educational and environmental approach. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Society for Nutrition Education. Joint position of Society for Nutrition Education (SNE), The American Dietetic Association (ADA), and the American School Food Service Association (ASFSA); school-based nutrition programs and services. J Nutr Educ 1995; 27:58-61.

<sup>10</sup> Progressive Grocer Annual Report, April 2003.

<sup>11</sup> "Children's Role Models for Health: Parents Outrank Others." Survey by American Dietetic Association Foundation, January 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Kraak, V. The Influence of Commercialism on the Food Purchasing Behavior of Children and Teenage Youth. Family Economics and Nutrition Review. 1998, 11 (3): 15-24.

sources. FNS believes that this will increase the likelihood of positive changes in eating and nutrition-related behaviors for a significant portion of the FSP population and that effective State plans will duplicate this national focus. Furthermore, FSNE activities for children which include related parental activities hold greater promise of success because they reinforce nutrition messages in the home setting.

FNS' national focus on women and their children does not preclude States from also offering FSNE to other food stamp audience segments such as the elderly, men, or adults without children. A needs assessment of the food stamp eligible population will help States target FSNE effectively and efficiently to yield the greatest change in dietary behavior among the largest number of food stamp eligibles.

#### **4. Food Stamp Nutrition Education uses science-based, behaviorally-focused interventions and can maximize its national impact by concentrating on a small set of key outcomes.**

Current FNS policy calls for science-based food stamp nutrition education. FNS acknowledges that science-informed interventions based on the best available evidence may be used. This Guiding Principle clarifies the meaning of "science-based" to reflect FNS's expectation that FSNE operators focus on the following:

1. States demonstrate through research review or sound self-initiated evaluation, if needed, that interventions have been tested and demonstrated to be meaningful for their specific target audience(s), implemented as intended or modified with justification, and shown to have the intended impact on behavior.
2. States incorporate general education features that have been shown to be effective such as:
  - behaviorally-focused messages;
  - use of motivators and reinforcements that are personally relevant to the target audience;
  - use of multiple channels of communication to convey messages;
  - approaches that provide for active personal engagement; and
  - intensity/duration that provides the opportunity for multiple exposures to the message.

FNS encourages States to use a variety of approaches in their delivery of FSNE. Interactive group and one-on-one instruction and media campaigns are among the approaches used to deliver nutrition education to food stamp eligible audiences. Social marketing plays an important role in the design and implementation of many FSNE activities. This approach emphasizes:

- targeting an identified segment of the food stamp eligible audience;
- identifying nutrition needs of the target audience and associated behaviors and perceptions about reasons for and against changing behavior; and
- interacting with the target audience to test the message, materials, approach and delivery channel to ensure that these are understood and meaningful (are likely to lead to behavior change).

Social marketing and other behavior change models include intervention strategies at individual, organizational /institutional and societal levels. FNS recognizes the potential impact of environmental factors, including institution policy, neighborhood design, food access and advertising on eating and physical activity behaviors. However, many activities associated with environmental and policy changes are beyond the scope of FSNE and not allowable for reimbursement through the FSP. FSNE can help support State environmental changes, which target the food stamp eligible population, through health promotion efforts (e.g. promoting use of a walking trail, selection of healthy foods from vending machines, etc.) and by serving on relevant State and local advisory panels. Areas that, in general, fall outside the Agency's "reasonable and necessary" criteria include funding for infrastructure changes, like

establishing Farmer's Markets or building sidewalks, and organized efforts to influence elected officials or lobbying for legislative/policy changes.

While there are many important nutrition-related issues that impact the food stamp eligible audience, FNS encourages States to focus their FSNE efforts on the following behavior outcomes:

- Eat fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and nonfat or low-fat milk or milk products every day.<sup>13</sup>
- Be physically active every day as part of a healthy lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>
- Balance calorie intake from foods and beverages with calories expended.<sup>15</sup>

These behaviors are associated with a reduced risk of some forms of cancer, type 2 diabetes, and coronary heart disease. It is appropriate to focus on these behavior outcomes for FSNE since low-income individuals often experience a disproportionate share of diet-related problems that are risk factors in the major diseases contributing to poor health, disability and premature death. Other science-based messages that are consistent with the current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* and the USDA Food Guidance System are also allowable.

##### **5. Food Stamp Nutrition Education can maximize its reach when coordination and collaboration take place among a variety of stakeholders at the local, State, regional and national levels.**

There are many challenges that low-income people meet head-on every day in trying to achieve a healthy lifestyle. The likelihood of nutrition education messages successfully changing behaviors is increased when consistent and repeated messages are delivered through multiple channels.

Cross-program coordination and collaboration at the State and community levels include working together especially with other FNS programs toward a common goal to reinforce and amplify each other's efforts such as the FNS sponsored State Nutrition Action Plans (SNAPs). Collaborative projects necessitate commitments of staff support and time, as well as cost sharing among all involved entities.

To further support healthy lifestyles, State agencies are encouraged to provide wellness training for human service professionals to increase their awareness of healthy eating and active living so that they may serve as models for the population being taught as well as for general overall health in their professions. Such training would not be a cost of FSNE per se, but would be an allowable FSP administrative cost similar to other training or personnel benefits.

Nutrition education providers and human services professionals are encouraged to:

- Work with other FNS nutrition programs to plan and deliver common behaviorally-focused nutrition messages to reach FSP eligibles using many outlets. FSNE providers are encouraged to participate in the State Nutrition Action Plan (SNAP) process that is promoted by FNS.
- Work with other State and community health providers, agencies, professional and industry groups, advocacy groups, and organizations to coordinate and deliver behavior focused messages on healthy eating habits and active lifestyles.
- Use available materials that have been tested during development for clarity and relevance to the target audience and can be customized to local needs.

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<sup>13</sup> 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) [5-13 servings (2 ½ -6 ½ cups) of fruits and vegetables each day; 3 servings (approximately 3 ounces) of whole-grains each day; and 2-3 servings (cups) of nonfat or low-fat milk or milk products each day.]

<sup>14</sup> 2005 DGAs [For adults - 30 minutes of at least moderate physical activity on most days and for children and adolescents – 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days.]

<sup>15</sup> 2005 DGAs

**6. Food Stamp Nutrition Education is enhanced when the specific roles and responsibilities of local, State, regional and national food stamp agencies and nutrition education providers are defined and put into practice.**

Providing nutrition education to food stamp eligibles requires the cooperation and ongoing communication between Federal, State and local entities and the recognition that each of these sets of organizations has key roles and responsibilities as noted below. FNS also recognizes that there are many roles and responsibilities, such as program development, financial management, and training, which are common at all levels of FSNE operation.

**FNS, USDA:**

- Establishes FSNE policy and develops related guidelines and procedures, intervention programs and activities that address the highest priority nutrition problems and needs of the target audiences.
- Reimburses States for 50% of allowable, reasonable and necessary FSNE costs.
- Reviews and approves State FSNE plans.
- Monitors State FSNE projects.
- Leads the coordination of nutrition education and related efforts at the national and regional levels, including partnerships with other Federal agencies, appropriate national organizations and other public and private entities to address national priorities.
- Promotes and supports cross program collaboration and planning at State and local levels to ensure implementation of consistent and effective interventions.
- Aligns FSNE messages with all other FNS nutrition assistance program messages.
- Provides training and technical assistance to program providers at all levels including linking staff with appropriate resources.
- Develops and provides nutrition education materials for use with FSP eligibles.
- Oversees the collection and analysis of national FSNE data.
- Incorporates the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the USDA Food Guidance System into FNS nutrition assistance programs.
- Promotes science-based decisions through technical assistance, standards for research, and support for sound and systematic evaluation.
- Provides employee wellness programs that could serve as models for State and local agencies.

**State Food Stamp Program Agency:**

- Works collaboratively across State agencies, especially those administering other FNS Programs and with other appropriate agencies to promote healthy eating and active living among food stamp eligibles.
- Develops a coordinated, cohesive State FSNE Plan that addresses national and state priorities and links FSNE to food stamp benefits.
- Provides leadership, direction and information to entities contracted to provide FSNE services to ensure that FSNE appropriately serves FSP eligibles and is consistent with FSNE policies.
- Submits a unified State FSNE plan to FNS and provides assurances that Plan activities comply with FSNE policies.
- Submits a final FSNE performance report to FNS each year.
- Monitors implementation of the State's approved FSNE Plan including allowable expenditures.
- Offers training to state/local office human services staff on the availability of FSP and FSNE services.
- Provides budget information to FNS as required.
- Collects and reports data regarding participation in FSNE and characteristics of those served.
- Considers offering wellness training to State/local office human services professionals.

**State Nutrition Education Provider:**

- Works with State FSP agency, other FNS Programs and other FSNE providers within the state to develop a single comprehensive State FSNE Plan that addresses national/state priorities, needs of food stamp eligibles and includes sound evaluation strategies.
- Works with other State and local agencies and with private agencies to promote healthy eating and active living among food stamp eligibles.
- Implements science-based nutrition education as specified in the approved State FSNE plan.
- Submits required reports according to timelines established by State FSP.
- Works with State Food Stamp agency to provide training to State/local office human services staff on the availability of FSNE services.
- Collects and reports data regarding participation in FSNE and characteristics of those served.

**Local Food Stamp Office**

- Informs FSP participants and applicants of opportunities to participate in FSP services, including FSNE.
- Builds relationships with other local service providers (WIC, local health departments, school meals programs) so referrals of FSP participants to other nutrition and health related services can be made as appropriate.
- As space and resources allow, makes FSNE information and services available in the FSP office.
- Coordinates opportunities between food stamp outreach and nutrition education efforts, as appropriate and available.
- Participates in worksite wellness activities or community-based wellness programs, as appropriate and available.

**Local Nutrition Education Provider:**

- Delivers nutrition education services to food stamp eligibles according to approved FSNE plan.
- Helps food stamp eligibles understand how to eat a healthy diet on a limited food budget using food stamp benefits and managing their food resources.
- Uses appropriate educational strategies and implementation methods to reach food stamp eligibles.
- Collects and reports data regarding participation in FSNE and characteristics of those served.
- Builds relationships with other local service providers (WIC, local health departments, school meals programs) so referrals of FSP participants to other nutrition and health related services can be made as appropriate.
- Provides referrals to the FSP for low-income non-participants to access food stamp benefits, as appropriate.