

**NUTRITION ASSISTANCE STUDY AND EVALUATION PLAN  
FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
FISCAL YEAR 2004**

**April 20, 2004**

America's food and nutrition assistance programs form a nationwide nutrition safety net to help low-income families and individuals escape hunger and improve nutrition. Together, these programs touch the lives of one in five Americans over the course of a year and, with an expected investment of \$50 billion in fiscal year 2004, account for about 60 percent of USDA's annual budget. Operational assessments that respond directly to the needs of program policy makers and managers help ensure that these programs achieve their mission effectively.

The study and evaluation agenda addresses four key program priorities:

- **Improve program access** so that all those eligible for nutrition assistance are able to participate, especially in Food Stamps, School Breakfast, and Summer Food Service.
- **Improve program integrity** to strengthen operations and safeguard taxpayer investments.
- **Build a *HealthierUS* and address obesity** by better integrating nutrition education and promoting healthy eating and physical activity among those eligible for nutrition assistance.
- **Strengthen performance measurement** to improve the capacity to link program performance and desired outcomes.

**Improve Program Access**

**Measuring Program Access, Trends, and Impacts** – This project supports several key analytic tools (including microsimulation) to address program participation trends and impacts. It provides annual estimates of the percentage of eligible individuals who receive food stamps, for the nation as a whole and for individual states, providing a key measure of the program's effectiveness in reaching its target population. The project also generates annual reports on the characteristics of food stamp participants. In addition, the project provides the primary mechanism through which FNS estimates the caseload and budgetary impact of actual and proposed policy changes. [*Option under existing contract.*]

**National Work Advancement and Support Center Demonstration** – Many low-wage workers do not receive the full package of financial work supports available to them even though it can fundamentally change the return on low-wage work, raising a family well above the poverty level. This project will continue support for a multi-year demonstration of new systems and procedures that make it easier for low-wage workers to access the full range of financial work supports – including food stamps. Funds would be provided to the U.S. Department of Labor, which serves as the lead federal agency in a consortium of public and private funders. Initial funding supports the development and implementation of an integrated work support demonstration in selected sites in 2003 and 2004; future year funding will support a rigorous

independent evaluation. The evaluation will include an assessment of the added value provided by faith- and community-based organizations in recruiting and sustaining participation among the hard-to-reach. *[Interagency transfer to Department of Labor.]*

**Customer Feedback on Food Stamp Outreach Materials** – FNS has developed a variety of materials designed for program partners, advocates, and the public to distribute to consumers who may be eligible to participate in the Food Stamp Program. These materials include posters, brochures, and fliers. All materials have been produced for each of four main audiences – the general public, the working poor, seniors and immigrants – and some materials targeted to disabled persons and veterans are also available. Some of the materials are available in Spanish. This project will create, implement, and analyze a web-based survey to obtain feedback from users on the usefulness of the materials made available to date and suggestions for improvements or additions. *[Small business or 8(a) set aside.]*

### **Improve Program Integrity**

**WIC Vendor Practices** – This Congressionally-mandated study will examine the extent to which vendors comply with program rules and ensure that proper foods are purchased from retail stores. This would be the first study of WIC vendor management practices since new vendor management regulations were issued. It will also build on State high-risk vendor identification systems to identify and evaluate the efficacy of high-risk indicators that would allow States to target their limited investigation resources toward vendors that are most likely to be overcharging on food instruments. *[Contract awarded on February 20, 2004.]*

**Measures of Erroneous Payments in School Meal Programs** – In accordance with the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-300), USDA is required to identify and reduce erroneous payments in various programs including the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP). This large-scale study would collect nationally representative data (certification, meal claiming, participation) to reliably estimate erroneous under and over payments. A secondary analysis may examine the extent to which the underlying eligibility of enrolled households change during the three years after applications are obtained during the base year for Provision 2/3 schools. In addition, this study would develop simulation models for generating annual national estimates of erroneous payments in NSLP and SBP from existing administrative records. *[Full and open competition; request for proposals scheduled for April 26, 2004 release.]*

**Feasibility of Data Matching in School Meal Programs** – This project is assessing current State infrastructure and capability to conduct data matching as an additional source of eligibility information in the school meals certification process. An initial census of all States will be followed by in-depth data collection in seven States. The results will be used to improve the process for determination and verification of student eligibility for school meals. Funding was provided in fiscal year 2003 for the initial census and in-depth data collection. Fiscal year 2004 funds will support additional analysis and final report writing. *[Modification to existing contract.]*

**Validation of Socio-Economic Survey Data** – The School District of Philadelphia has been using a combination of direct certification data and data from a socio-economic survey to develop estimates of the percentage of children who are eligible for free or reduced-price meal benefits. This data is used in lieu of collecting income eligibility applications from families each year. Because the verification process was eliminated, the statistical validity of these estimates has been questioned. This research activity requests the Bureau of Census to produce special tabulations to obtain estimates of the percentages of children attending public schools who are eligible for free, reduced and paid meal benefits under the National School Lunch Program in specifically defined census blocks. These estimates will then be compared to those estimates produced by the School District of Philadelphia. *[Interagency transfer to Bureau of the Census.]*

### **Build a HealthierUS/Obesity Prevention**

**School Nutrition Dietary Assessment III** – The school meals programs have changed considerably since the last national studies of student diets and meal costs were completed in the 1990's. As part of the Agency's periodic assessment of the nutritional effects of school meals, this study would update information on five domains of great interest to policy makers: (1) characteristics of the school environment and school food service operations; (2) nutritional quality of meals offered and served in the school meal programs; (3) student participation, participant characteristics, satisfaction, and related attitudes toward the school lunch and breakfast program; and (4) student dietary intakes and the contribution of school meals to these dietary intakes. Funding was provided in fiscal year 2003 to develop a sampling frame for national studies of the school meals programs. Fiscal year 2004 funds will support the selection and recruitment of school districts, study design and instrument development, and initial data collection activities. *[GSA/FSS competition; request for proposals released February 28, 2004.]*

**Effects of Program Participation on Food Consumption and Diet Quality** – All of the major Federal nutrition assistance programs include improved nutrition among their goals. A critical research question when studying the effectiveness of these programs, therefore, is the relationship between program participation and dietary outcomes. This project will address what low-income Americans eat, compare their diets to accepted standards for healthy eating, and examine the relationship between program participation and dietary intake. It will build on the existing research by using the most current information from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. It will also measure these relationships for each of the nutrition assistance programs addressed in NHANES and explore the relationship between participation in multiple food assistance programs and participants' dietary status. *[Competitive task order award under existing IDIQ contract. Not available for open competition.]*

**USDA Research Conference on Obesity Prevention** – The problem of obesity in America has reached epidemic proportions. Over 60 percent of adults and over 15 percent of children are either overweight or obese. This multi-agency conference will identify an obesity prevention research agenda that reflects the unique perspective and capacities of USDA. The conference will focus on nutrition and diet, behavioral science, physical activity, and integrated program approaches. The conference is planned for early fall of 2004. *[Interagency transfer to USDA Research, Education, and Economics.]*

**Analysis of EBT Benefit Redemption Patterns** – The Food Stamp Program is designed to help low-income households obtain a more nutritious diet through normal channels of trade. Prior to implementation of EBT, information about where recipients redeem their benefits could only be tracked by aggregate statistics showing the volume of redemptions at each type of authorized retailer. EBT transaction data offer detailed information about food stamp benefit redemptions. The only systematic analysis of these data occurred in the context of the expanded EBT demonstration in Maryland, using transactions for August-October 1993. This project will assemble a more broadly representative set of EBT transaction data and examine patterns of food stamp benefit redemption, including the types of stores used, the frequency of shopping trips, and the timing of benefit exhaustion. *[Competitive task order award under existing IDIQ contract. Not available for open competition.]*

**Food and Nutrition Information Center** – These funds will support the Food and Nutrition Information Center (FNIC) within the National Agriculture Library to systematically store and disseminate information on USDA’s food assistance programs, nutrition education, and related nutrition topics. *[Interagency transfer to Food and Nutrition Information Center.]*

### **Strengthen Performance Measurement**

**National Survey of Nutrition Assistance Program Participants** – A comprehensive survey of program participants and eligible non-participants is needed to update previous work measuring the level of customer satisfaction, assessing participants’ access to food retailers, and identifying barriers to participation (especially among working eligible non-participants). At the same time, a participant survey can potentially resolve a variety of issues for which there are no sufficient data. These include measuring the degree to which nutrition assistance programs reduce hunger, resolving paradoxical relationships among program participation and food security, and determining the use and added value of nutrition education and information among program participants. There are significant design challenges involved in determining whether to embrace a longitudinal or cross-sectional design. Fiscal year 2004 funding will be used to identify the gaps in knowledge that a survey can address and determine an appropriate design. *[Competitive task order award under existing IDIQ contract. Not available for open competition.]*

**Enhanced Measurement of Program Performance (Concept Papers)** – The program faces a number of recurrent and difficult issues: e.g., how to measure the effectiveness of outreach, determining whether program participation encourages obesity, evaluating the effectiveness of error reduction efforts. This project will commission several independent papers to bring new perspectives to these issues and to build capacity among researchers to address the issues. *[Competitive task order award under existing IDIQ contract. Not available for open competition.]*

**Review of the USDA Food Security Measure** – USDA’s measure of household food security and hunger has come to play a central role in gauging the performance of the Federal nutrition assistance programs. The key decisions that shaped this measure were made nearly 10 years ago. To ensure that the measure continues to reflect the current state-of-the art, the Economic Research Service has entered into an agreement with the Committee on National Statistics to

convene an expert panel to consider whether the conceptualization of and methods for measuring food insecurity and hunger are appropriate for the policy purposes for which they are intended. The expert panel will also make recommendations to enhance these methods for monitoring, evaluation, and related research purposes. These funds would be provided to the Economic Research Service to enable completion of the panel's work. *[Interagency transfer to Economic Research Service.]*