

**NUTRITION ASSISTANCE STUDY AND EVALUATION PLAN  
FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE  
FISCAL YEAR 2005**

**November 17, 2004**

The fiscal year 2005 study and evaluation agenda for the nutrition assistance programs administered by the Food and Nutrition Service addresses four key program priorities:

- **Improve program access** so that all those eligible for nutrition assistance are able to participate.
- **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.
- **Analysis of Program Participation Dynamics** – A series of studies have examined individuals’ patterns of participation in the Food Stamp Program, showing, for example, that half of all new entrants left the program within 9 months during the early 1990s. This project will use data from the 2001 longitudinal panel of the Survey of Income and Program Participation to update these analyses for a more current period, subsequent to welfare reform, and broaden the analysis to include other major nutrition assistance programs (school meals and WIC). The analysis will examine the events that lead people to enter (or exit) the major nutrition assistance programs, the length of time individuals receive program benefits, the probability that those who leave return (and the length of time before they return), and the characteristics that distinguish long-term from short-term participants.
- **Pennsylvania SFSP Rural Eligibility Pilot Project** – The CN and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 reduces the threshold for poor economic areas in rural Pennsylvania from 50% to 40% of the children eligible for free and reduced price school meals for use in the SFSP. SFSP programs operating “open-sites” in these areas during 2005 and 2006 can claim all meals served to children as free meals. The evaluation is expected to examine the impact of the threshold change on the number of SFSP sponsors and sites participating, the geographical location of the SFSP sites, and services provided to eligible children. An evaluation is due to Congress by January 1, 2008.

### *Improve Program Integrity*

- **School Lunch and Breakfast Cost Study II** – Congress is concerned about the effect of rising food and labor costs on school meal programs. This study would update meal cost information collected in SY 1992-93 using the same methodology to estimate the cost of producing reimbursable meals. This study would examine all revenues and expenditures as they relate to activities conducted by food service, including a la carte sales, joint food sales conducted with other organizations within the school and the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs. Of particular interest would be the treatment of indirect costs and indirect cost rates as they relate to the food service account. In addition, this study would examine the amount of operating dollars remaining in the School Food Service account, reasons for these balances, and potential future outlays.
- **Update Estimates of Food Stamp Trafficking** – This project will update estimates of the extent of food stamp trafficking – the exchange of food stamp benefits for cash – using the results of undercover investigations and EBT-based administrative case actions against retailers suspected of trafficking. FNS has previously released estimates for 1993, 1996-1998, and 1999-2002. This update will cover the period 2003-2005.
- **Regional Office Administrative Error Determination** – As part of the overall plan to provide OMB with data on erroneous payments in the NSLP/SBP, Regional Office staff will review the free/reduced-price eligibility determination status for a nationally representative sample of applications. Certification applications will be examined to determine if applications were approved accurately based on the documentation provided by the household. These funds will be used to obtain contractor assistance in drawing a nationally-representative sample of applications to estimate the amount of administrative error in the certification process at the SFA-level.
- **CACFP Sponsor Tiering Determination** – To address OMB’s requirements for data relative to the Improper Payments Information Act of 2002, a review of the classification determination of family day care homes for Tier 1 or Tier will be conducted in a nationally representative sample of CACFP sponsors on an annual basis. This annual data collection will produce annual estimates of the rates and erroneous payment dollars associated with improper sponsor tiering decisions.

### *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 supported the selection and recruitment of school districts, study design and instrument development, and initial data collection activities. Fiscal year 2005 funds will support additional data collection activities, data analysis and final report writing.

- **Development of Instruments for Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment** – The goal of Value Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA) is to redirect dietary assessment from eligibility determination to improved nutrition education. VENA will improve and enhance the risk assessment process by ensuring completion of a medical-nutritional assessment and streamlining dietary assessments to collect more relevant information that allows for more time for nutrition education and more individualized services. A workgroup is developing nutrition assessment guidance (with final approval by FNS) for the purposes of WIC eligibility determination and individualizing nutrition services. The dietary assessment guidance will recommend protocol(s) (most likely a questionnaire) to collect information about eating and food behaviors for the main purpose of providing relevant and individualized nutrition education. Ideally, a protocol will be developed for each category of participants. The proposed study would provide technical expertise and assistance in developing reliable and valid instruments for this purpose.
- **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.

### **Strengthen Performance Measurement**

- **WIC Eligibles Estimation Methodology** – USDA sponsored research throughout the 1990s to expand the research base that could be used to improve eligibles estimates for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. In 1999, USDA contracted with the National Academies’ National Research Council (NRC) to conduct an expert review of the historical methodology that had been used by USDA to estimate eligibility for the WIC program. An initial (Phase I) report by the review panel, issued in 2001, indicated that the historical method for estimating the number of people eligible for WIC substantially underestimates the number actually eligible. The final report, published in 2003, included step-by-step procedures for calculating a more accurate estimate of eligibles for the WIC program. This project will enlist contractor support to implement the procedures recommended by NRC to provide policy makers with information about the potential population that could be served by WIC. A portion of these analyses were funded in FY 2004.
- **Cognitive Testing for FSNE Outcome Measure** – As part of an on-going collaboration with the Economic Research Service to develop a sound measure that can be widely used to assess Food Stamp Nutrition Education, FNS plans to conduct formal cognitive testing on the initial set of survey items developed for this purpose. Testing involves a series of in-depth interviews with persons from the target population to determine the clarity and meaningfulness of proposed survey items.