



Overview



Food Stamp Program Education and Administrative Reporting System

Purpose

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has developed a reporting system for the nutrition education component of the Food Stamp Program (FSP). The new Education and Administrative Reporting System (EARS) will provide uniform data and information about Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE) activities across all States. The data collected through EARS will include demographic characteristics of participants, as well as information on education strategies, content, and resource use. The EARS will provide FNS with uniform national data and information that will inform management decisions, support policy initiatives, provide documentation for legislative, budget and other requests, and support planning within the agency.

The EARS report provides data on the scope and reach of nutrition education provided through FSP as well as information to inform policy decisions

Background

The FSP is the largest nutrition assistance program administered by the USDA. In Federal Fiscal Year 2007, the Program served about 26 million people each month. Nutrition education is an important but optional part of the FSP. FSNE plays an essential role in assisting food stamp recipients in making healthy food and active lifestyles choices.

Currently 52 Food Stamp State agencies provide FSNE. State agencies submit an annual report containing some demographic information and a summary of progress in implementing prior year's plans. However, there is wide variation in the type of information provided. The phenomenal growth of food stamp nutrition education over the last several years is a testament to both its importance and popularity.

Many factors have contributed to the growth of FSNE. The increase in diet related diseases, overweight, and obesity has resulted in growing recognition of the value of nutrition education in both helping Food Stamp participants become more self-sufficient but also in improving their chances for a healthier and more productive life. Federal and States policy makers are also more aware of the value of nutrition education in helping food stamp recipients provide their families with a nutritious diet while they are on the program and as they make the transition from welfare to work. Despite the growth of FSNE, there is little national information on the reach and cost of the education benefits.

The rapid growth of FSNE presents FNS with a number of challenges. One of the challenges identified in the April 28, 2000 FNS report of FSNE is the need to develop reporting systems to report both the number of clients being served by agencies and agency progress in meeting goals and objectives. EARS is a step toward meeting this challenge.

Data from EARS will aid FNS in documenting the scope and reach of nutrition education provided through FSP as well as progress in meeting goals and objectives

Approach

FNS initiated the development of EARS in 2003. To ensure that the report reflected the needs of both FNS and States, the agency used a collaborative approach in developing the reporting system by convening an EARS work group of diverse experts for this purpose. The EARS work group consisted of stakeholders with a wide range of skills and expertise relevant to this task, including people from the State, local, and federal levels, as well as academia. The developmental process also allowed ample opportunities for input from other stakeholders, advocates and other interested parties. The process allowed opportunities for both informal and formal comments periods throughout the development.

FNS also retained the services of contractors to facilitate the activities of the work group, to aid in pilot testing the reporting system in six states and developing training materials.

OMB Clearance

FNS submitted the EARS Information Collection Request (ICR) to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) on January 10, 2007. After extensive negotiations, FNS and OMB staff reached an agreement on all issues on August 14, 2007. This included a commitment by FNS to integrate EARS and the annual narrative report to eliminate duplications and link these efforts. OMB granted approval for EARS on August 22, 2007.

Implementation

Under the current schedule, all State agencies are required to submit financial data for FY 2008 in December 2008 and early implementers are encouraged to submit data for the other components of EARS in December 2008. Beginning with FY 2010 all States agencies must submit annual data on all applicable components of EARS.

To facilitate reporting and analysis of this data, FNS is developing an online EARS submission system that utilizes the current FNS reporting infrastructure. This system will be a component FNS' web-based Food Program Reporting System (FPRS) that is currently used by State agencies to submit food program activity and financial information to FNS.

FNS will conduct training sessions in all seven FNS regions. These sessions will take place between January and April 2008. As needed follow-up trainings will take place throughout 2009. Materials will also be available online for State and implementing agencies to use and adapt to their own needs.