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STUDY CALLS FOR CHANGES IN THE WIC PROGRAM TO PROVIDE MORE WHOLE GRAINS, FRUITS, VEGETABLES

A new report from the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies proposes a number of changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition assistance program to encourage participants to consume more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, as well as to promote breast-feeding, among other goals. If implemented, these revisions would be the most substantial changes to the mix of foods offered through WIC since the program was launched in 1974. The recommendations also are the first effort to apply the new Dietary Guidelines for Americans to a national food program.

"Because scientific knowledge about nutrition has greatly increased since the WIC program's inception, and the nutritional challenges facing families have altered significantly, it is definitely time for a change in the foods offered through WIC," said Suzanne P. Murphy, chair of the committee that wrote the report and research professor at the Cancer Research Center of Hawaii, University of Hawaii, Honolulu. "We now know much more about the links between nutrition and chronic diseases, plus the nation is in the midst of an obesity epidemic. Our proposed revisions would bring the foods provided through WIC up to date with current nutritional science and make it easier for participants

to improve their diets and health."

WIC is one of the largest nutrition programs in the United States. In 2000 the WIC program served about half of all U.S. infants and about a quarter of children ages one through four, along with many of their mothers. The costs of providing supplemental food packages as well as nutrition education, breast-feeding support, and other assistance to 7.6 million participants a month totaled \$4.7 billion in 2003. In many localities, food "packages" are actually itemized vouchers or checks that participants use to obtain specific foods at participating grocery outlets. The packages have remained largely unchanged since the U.S. Department of Agriculture initiated the program 30 years ago.

One of the most fundamental revisions proposed by the report is the inclusion of a wide choice of fruits and vegetables in the food packages for women and children. WIC participants should be given vouchers or coupons for fresh produce totaling \$10 per month for each woman and \$8 a month per child. The amount corresponds to one to two servings of fruits and vegetables a day. When access to fresh produce is limited, WIC state agencies can specify that participating women may choose processed items, such as canned fruits and vegetables, in comparable amounts, the report says. The expansion of the WIC food packages to include fresh produce applies a major recommendation of the new federal dietary guidelines,

which call for people to eat more fruits and vegetables daily. The only fruits and vegetables currently provided through WIC are juice for all participants four months and older, and carrots for new mothers who breast-feed rather than formula-feed.

The committee also proposed that fruit and vegetable baby foods be added to the packages for infants six months and older. Baby food meats also should be added to the packages for infants six months and older who are primarily breast-fed to ensure that their iron and zinc needs are met. Currently, the only semisolid foods offered through WIC are infant cereals, starting at four months. Cereal and other semisolid foods should not be part of the packages for infants until they reach six months, the age at which many medical and nutritional experts agree that almost all infants are developmentally ready for such foods, the report says.

The breakfast cereals that have been a key part of WIC food packages for women and children should be whole-grain varieties only, the report says. Some popular breakfast cereals are whole grain, but others do not provide whole grains' health benefits, such as protection against heart disease. The food packages should also provide whole-grain bread or brown rice, among other options. These additions will help WIC participants meet the new dietary guidelines to get at least three servings of whole grains daily.

To help ensure that these changes are cost-neutral, the committee recommended reducing the amount of juice, eggs, cheese, and milk offered through the program. These reductions are consistent with current dietary guidance, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation that young children drink no more than four to six ounces of fruit juice per day, and the American Heart Association's recommendation that people limit their intake of cholesterol, saturated fat, and total fat.

To help participants reduce their saturated fat

intakes, the WIC program should offer only milk that contains no more than two percent fat in the food packages for women and children over age two, the report says. However, children up to two years old should receive whole milk because of their developmental need for dietary fat. In addition, the committee recommended that the amount of cheese provided for most participants be reduced from a maximum of four pounds per month to no more than one pound monthly.

To promote the benefits of breast-feeding, the revised food packages for mother-infant pairs who rely on breast-feeding as the primary feeding method should contain greater amounts and a wider variety of foods to be more attractive, the report says. For example, the package for mothers who primarily breast-feed should include more milk, eggs, cheese, and whole grains than the packages for women who formula-feed. The packages for older infants who are given no formula should contain twice the amount of baby food fruits and vegetables than the packages for older infants who receive formula.

The committee called for the WIC program to provide a broader variety of food options and allow more choices to take into account the wide range of dietary and cultural preferences among WIC participants. There should be few restrictions on participants' choices among fresh produce, the report says. Yogurt should be permitted as a substitute for some of the milk for both women and children, and tofu and soy beverages should be allowed as alternatives to milk for women.

Overall, the proposed additions, deletions, and substitutions would make it possible for the WIC program to provide a wider variety of foods without raising the total cost of the food packages, the committee concluded. The average monthly cost per participant currently is estimated to be about \$35, which would be approximately the same for the revised packages if all the chang-

es are made.

Recognizing that some of the proposed changes entail significant adjustments and could result in unanticipated effects, the committee recommended that they be tested first in pilot programs before being implemented nationwide. For example, if participants will not drink milk with less fat or eat whole-grain products, then the revised food packages for children and women may inadvertently result in less grain and milk consumption.

For a copy of the report, visit http://books.nap.edu/catalog/11280.html?onpi_newsdoc04272005.

FOOD PYRAMID UPDATED TO INCLUDE INTERACTIVE WEBSITE

Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns unveiled MyPyramid, a new symbol and interactive food guidance system. MyPyramid, which replaces the Food Guide Pyramid introduced in 1992, is part of an overall food guidance system that emphasizes the need for a more individualized approach to improving diet and lifestyle. It is designed to help Americans live longer, better and healthier lives.

“MyPyramid is about the ability of Americans to personalize their approach when choosing a healthier lifestyle that balances nutrition and exercise,” said Johanns. “Many Americans can dramatically improve their overall health by making modest improvements to their diets and by incorporating regular physical activity into their daily lives.”

MyPyramid incorporates recommendations from the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which was released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in January. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans provide authoritative advice for people two years of age and older about how proper di-

etary habits can promote health and reduce the risk of major chronic diseases. MyPyramid was developed to carry the messages of the dietary guidelines and to make Americans aware of the vital health benefits of simple and modest improvements in nutrition, physical activity and lifestyle behavior.

The MyPyramid symbol, which is deliberately simple, is meant to encourage consumers to make healthier food choices and to be active every day. Consumers can get more in-depth information from the new web site, MyPyramid.gov, so that they can make these choices to fit their own needs.

The MyPyramid symbol represents the recommended proportion of foods from each food group and focuses on the importance of making smart food choices in every food group, every day. Physical activity is a new element in the symbol. MyPyramid illustrates:

- Personalization, demonstrated by the MyPyramid web site. To find a personalized recommendation of the kinds and amounts of food to eat each day, go to MyPyramid.gov.
- Gradual improvement, encouraged by the slogan, “Steps to a Healthier You.” It suggests that individuals can benefit from taking small steps to improve their diet and lifestyle each day.
- Physical activity, represented by the steps and the person climbing them, as a reminder of the importance of daily physical activity.
- Variety, symbolized by the six color bands representing the five food groups of MyPyramid and oils. Foods from all groups are needed each day for good health.
- Moderation, represented by the narrowing of each food group from bottom to top. The wider base stands for foods with little or no solid fats, added sugars, or caloric sweeteners. These should be selected more often to get the most nutrition from calories consumed.
- Proportionality, shown by the different widths

of the food group bands. The widths suggest how much food a person should choose from each group. The widths are just a general guide, not exact proportions. Check MyPyramid.gov for the amount that is right for you.

The new food guidance system utilizes interactive technology found on MyPyramid.gov. MyPyramid contains activities that make it easy for individuals to key in their age, gender and physical activity level so that they can get a more personalized recommendation on their daily calorie level based on the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans. It also allows individuals to find general food guidance and suggestions for making smart choices from each food group. MyPyramid.gov features:

- MyPyramid Plan - provides a quick estimate of what and how much food you should eat from the different food groups by entering your age, gender and activity level.
- MyPyramid Tracker - provides more detailed information on your diet quality and physical activity status by comparing a day's worth of foods eaten with current nutrition guidance. Relevant nutrition and physical activity messages are tailored to your desire to maintain your current weight or to lose weight.
- Inside MyPyramid - provides in-depth information for every food group, including recommended daily amounts in commonly used measures, like cups and ounces, with examples and everyday tips. The section also includes recommendations for choosing healthy oils, discretionary calories and physical activity.
- Start Today - provides tips and resources that include downloadable suggestions on all the food groups and physical activity, and a worksheet to track what you are eating.

Future enhancements to MyPyramid.gov will include features that make it possible for consumers to make specific food choices by group, look

at everyday portions of favorite foods and adjust their choices to meet their daily needs.

A child-friendly version of MyPyramid for teachers and children is being developed. This version of MyPyramid is intended to reach children six to 11 years old with targeted messages about the importance of making smart eating and physical activity choices.

Additional information is available at MyPyramid.gov. The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans are available at www.healthierus.gov/dietaryguidelines.

RESOURCES

- Selected presentations from the 2005 Food Research and Action Center/America's Second Harvest/National Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Forum National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference are available online. Presentations covered the federal food and nutrition programs, the fight over budget cuts in food stamps and other human needs programs, CACFP, using data for advocacy, Earned Income Tax Credit outreach, and numerous aspects of food stamps, school breakfast and lunch, afterschool and summer food, obesity, and technology.

To view the presentations, go to www.frac.org/Conference/2005/index.html.

- The Presbyterian Hunger Program provides grants to programs addressing hunger and its causes in the United States and around the world. Grants support efforts in Direct Hunger Relief, Development Assistance, Public Policy Advocacy, Lifestyle Integrity, and Hunger Education. Eligible requests should benefit poor people, especially women, racial-ethnic persons or other disadvantaged groups. The next application deadline is July 31, 2005.

Visit the website www.pcusa.org/pcusa/wmd/hunger/grants.htm for detailed funding guidelines.

2005 INDEX OF CHILD WELL-BEING SHOWS MIXED PICTURE FOR AMERICA'S CHILDREN

Dramatic declines in rates of violence and risky behaviors such as teen births, smoking, and alcohol and illegal drug use during the past ten years have contributed substantially to modest and slow progress in the overall well-being of America's children, according to the 2005 Index of Child Well-Being (CWI), released by the Foundation for Child Development (FCD).

Overall child well-being improved only fractionally, from 104.48 in 2002 to 104.56 in 2003 – a gain of just 4.5 percent over the base year of 1975.

Several of the underlying trends are discouraging:

- The rate of educational attainment – as measured by student test scores in reading and mathematics – remains stagnant, despite two decades of national focus on how to improve the education system.
- More children live in poverty today than did in 1975.
- High rates of obesity – which have more than tripled in 30 years – are seriously hurting children's health.

"If you took away the huge declines in crime, violence, and risky behaviors since the early 1990s, the picture for America's children would be bleak," said Kenneth Land, Ph.D., developer of the CWI and a sociologist at Duke University. "We need to do a better job of investing in our children's futures."

On the positive side, the CWI shows that violent criminal activity among adolescents and teens has plummeted by more than 64 percent since 1975 and violent crime victimization of children has fallen by more than 38 percent. Meanwhile, births to adolescent and teenage mothers have dropped by nearly 37 percent. Smoking among young people continues to

decline, although the rate of binge alcohol drinking increased from 27.9 percent in 2003 to 29.2 percent in 2004.

Other highlights from the CWI include the following:

- The financial status of American families with children continues its decline from 2000. In 2003, the poverty rate for families with children rose above 1975 baseline levels for the first time since 1998. Median family income has fallen steadily since 1999, and is projected to decline further for 2004.
- Downward trends in overall child health persist, solely because of obesity. The overall child health score for 2003 is some 17 percent below 1975 levels due primarily to the continuing obesity crisis. Land said the problem will not go away any time soon. "It took a generation for overweight and obesity to reach these extreme levels, and it's going to take at least a generation to turn those levels back," he said.
- Test scores for reading and mathematics have shown little improvement since 1975. Overall, math scores have risen more than reading scores, possibly because of the increasing number of school children from immigrant families who do not speak English as their first language.

The Index of Child Well-Being is a national, research-based composite measure updated annually that describes how young people in the United States have fared since 1975, by combining data from 28 indicators across seven domains into a single number for child well-being. Those quality-of-life domains are: Family Economic Well-Being, Health, Safety/Behavioral Concerns, Educational Attainment, Community Connectedness, Social Relationships, and Emotional and Spiritual Well-Being.

For additional information, visit the Foundation for Child Development web site at www.ffcd.org/ourwork/k-index.html.

STATES REDUCING FOOD STAMP ERRORS

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently completed a study regarding payment accuracy in the Food Stamp Program. In fiscal year 2003, the federal Food Stamp Program made payment errors totaling about \$1.4 billion in benefits, or about seven percent of the total \$21.4 billion in benefits provided to a monthly average of 21 million low-income participants. It is important to maintain the accuracy of the program because it ensures taxpayer dollars are being used appropriately and maintains public confidence in the program.

As part of the study, GAO examined: (1) what is included in the national food stamp payment error rate and how it has changed over time, (2) what is known about the causes of food stamp payment errors, and (3) what actions the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) and states have taken to reduce these payment errors. GAO analyzed program quality control data for fiscal years 1999 through 2003 and interviewed program stakeholders, including state and local officials from nine states.

The GAO found that national dollar payment error rate for the Food Stamp Program, that combines states' overpayments and underpayments to program participants in all states, has declined by almost one-third over the last five years to a record low of 6.63 percent. This decline has been widespread; the rate fell in 41 states and the District of Columbia, and rates in 18 of these states fell by at least one-third. However, despite this decrease, some states continue to have relatively high payment error rates. For example, in 2003, seven states had payment error rates of more than ten percent.

Almost two-thirds of food stamp payment errors are caused by caseworkers, usually when they fail to keep up with reported changes or make mistakes applying program rules, and one-third are caused by participant failure to report re-

quired, complete, or correct information, such as household income and composition. State officials said program complexity and other factors, such as the lack of resources and staff turnover, can contribute to these errors. In fiscal year 2003, states referred about five percent of all cases identified with errors for suspected participant fraud investigation.

FNS and the nine states reviewed have taken many approaches to increasing food stamp payment accuracy, most of which are parallel with internal control practices known to reduce improper payments. These approaches include:

- practices to improve accountability;
- conducting risk assessments;
- implementing program and process changes based on those assessments; and
- monitoring and promoting improved performance.

FNS's increased focus on the error rate and the threat of increased financial penalties were cited by several states as the impetus for state leaders and managers to make payment accuracy a priority. Also, some states are holding their local managers accountable for their error rates by setting overall local office target rates or including target rates in the managers' contracts. FNS and the states are also actively conducting risk assessments to identify the types and sources of payment errors.

Overall, states put into place a combination of approaches based upon their available resources, priorities, the nature of their errors, and other factors, making it difficult to tie error rate improvements to specific practices. However, state officials point to their improved state error rates as evidence that collectively the practices are having an impact.

This article was edited and reprinted from the report.

***A copy is available at www.gao.gov.
Reference report GAO-05-245.***

FEDERAL REGISTER

• **Department of Agriculture (USDA), 04/11/05, pp. 18263-18271.** The Food and Nutrition Service revised Food Stamp Program (FSP) rules affecting the standards for approval and operation of Food Stamp Electronic Benefit Transfer systems. The changes will increase State agency flexibility in administering the FSP and maximize the advantages afforded by the technology. The revisions will also streamline FSP administration and improve customer service. Based on the comments received, a significant change to the store-and-forward provision of the proposed rule has been incorporated. USDA has decided to publish this provision only as an interim rule so that retailers may immediately be allowed to recoup partial payment for store-and-forward transactions denied solely for insufficient funds, and at the same time, it can solicit comments on the impact of the change. USDA is publishing all of the remaining provisions from the proposed rule as a final rule. The interim and final provisions of this rule are effective 05/11/05. State agencies may implement the provisions no later than 10/01/05. Submit comments by 06/10/05 to Mandy Briggs, Chief, EBT Branch, Benefit Redemption Division, Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 3101 Park Center Drive, Room 403, Alexandria, VA 22302; fax 703/305-1863; e-mail: BRDHQ-WEB@fns.usda.gov. Comments may also be submitted through www.regulations.gov.

• **Department of Health And Human Services (HHS), 04/18/05, pp. 20135-20145.** Office of Community Services, Community Food and Nutrition Program announces a funding opportunity (number: HHS-2005-ACF-OCS-EN-0024). The application deadline is 06/17/05. Funds are available under several programs to support program activities that will result in direct benefits targeted to low-income people. Grants will be awarded on a competitive basis to eligible entities for community-based, local, statewide and national programs including programs benefiting Indians and migrant farm workers. Grant funds are provided to: (1) coordinate private and public food assistance resources, wherever the grant recipient involved determines such coordination to be inadequate, to better serve low-income populations; (2) assist low-income communities to identify potential sponsors of child nutrition programs and to initiate such programs in underserved or unserved areas; and (3) develop innovative approaches at the State and local level to meet the nutrition needs of low-income individuals. This program is a capacity building program, rather than a food delivery program. OCS encourages eligible applicants with programs addressing obesity to submit applications. For additional information, go to www.fedgrants.gov/Applicants/HHS/ACF/OA/HHS-2005-ACF-OCS-EN-0024/Grant.html.

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TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY ACTION AGENCIES, INC.

2512 IH 35 South, Suite 100

Austin, Texas 78704-5751

Telephone: (512) 462-2555 or (800) 992-9767

Fax: 512/462-2004

E-Mail: foodjournal@taca.org Web Site: www.taca.org

TACAA STAFF

Stella Rodriguez	Executive Director
Laurie S. Haney	Executive Assistant
Vacant	Office Manager
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