

Notices

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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Food and Nutrition Service

Agency Information Collection Activities: Proposed Collection; Comment Request—Pilot-Testing of WIC Staffing Administrative Data Collection Process

AGENCY: Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice.

SUMMARY: In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) invites the general public and other interested parties to comment on a proposed pilot test of a potential new administrative data collection system for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The proposed pilot-testing described in this notice is part of FNS' larger effort to address the long term staffing challenges confronting the WIC Program's ability to provide quality nutrition services. This effort by FNS is in response to a General Accounting Office (GAO) recommendation that resulted in part from the concerns expressed by WIC state and local agencies and other program stakeholders that Nutrition Services and Administration (NSA) funding has not kept pace with the challenges and costs of program operations and administration.

DATES: To be assured of consideration, comments must be received on or before August 11, 2003.

ADDRESSES: Comments may be sent to Ed Herzog, Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, Food and Nutrition Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 3101 Park Center Drive, Alexandria, VA 22302. Comments may also be faxed to the attention of Mr. Herzog at 703-305-2576. The Internet address is: edward.herzog@fns.usda.gov.

We are soliciting comments on (a) whether the proposed collection of information is necessary for the proper performance of the functions of the agency, including whether the information shall have practical utility; (b) the accuracy of the agency's estimate of the burden of the proposed collection of information, including the validity of the methodology and assumptions used; (c) ways to enhance the quality, utility, and clarity of the information to be collected; and (d) ways to minimize the burden of the collection of information on those who are to respond, including use of appropriate automated, electronic, mechanical, or other technological collection techniques or other forms of information technology.

All written comments will be open for public inspection at the office of the Food and Nutrition Service during regular business hours (8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday) at 3101 Park Center Drive, Alexandria, Virginia 22302, Room 1006.

All responses to this notice will be summarized and included in the request for Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval. All comments will be a matter of public record.

All submitted comments should refer to the title of this proposal.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Edward Herzog at 703-305-2137.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Title: Pilot-testing of WIC Staffing Administrative Data Collection Process.

OMB Number: Not yet assigned.

Expiration Date: N/A.

Type of Request: New collection of information.

Abstract: The William F. Goodling Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act of 1998 (Pub. L. 105-336) directed GAO to assess various aspects of NSA funding of the WIC program. The request was motivated by the concerns of WIC state and local agencies and other program stakeholders that the NSA funding had not kept pace with the challenges and costs of program operations and administration.

In December 2001, GAO released their fifth and final report on this subject, Food Assistance: WIC Faces Challenges in Providing Nutrition Services (GAO-02-142). One of the key challenges noted in the report concerned the recruitment and retention of skilled staff.

In the report, GAO confirmed a widely recognized concern in the WIC

community that many local WIC agencies are reporting a shortfall in the number of professional staff available to the Program and difficulty acquiring professional staff members. For example, the 1998 WIC Participant and Program Characteristics report found that 30 percent of local WIC agencies serving over 40 percent of WIC participants reported having too few professional staff members. About half of the agencies reported having difficulty recruiting and hiring staff. GAO estimated that in Federal Fiscal Year 1998, between 5 to 15 percent of local WIC agencies did not have a nutritionist or dietitian on staff. The GAO report cites one WIC Director who suggested that the problem might worsen because WIC's workforce is aging and large numbers of WIC professionals are expected to retire in the next few years.

The WIC Program community, at the national and state level, and the professional nutrition community have also registered concern about the staffing issues currently facing the WIC program and interest in identifying staffing characteristics in greater detail. The National WIC Association (NWA) local agency section has also identified a need to better understand the issues affecting local agency staffing, and has identified a number of items of interest to the WIC community.

As noted by GAO and by FNS, a key obstacle in formulating strategies to address staffing needs in the WIC Program is the lack of data regarding issues such as staffing patterns, vacancies, turnover, and salaries at the local level. Without such data, identifying the exact nature of the staffing problems is difficult, and developing strategies to address these issues is an even greater challenge. Moreover, the lack of data can by itself be a contributing factor to the problems in recruiting and maintaining skilled staff. Until there is data documenting agencies' inability to meet demand, it is difficult to develop the infrastructure necessary to produce more professional staff and provide a greater level of support for them.

In order to address the lack of WIC staffing data, GAO recommended that FNS work with the Economic Research Service and the National Association of WIC Directors (now NWA) to conduct an assessment of the staffing needs of