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REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

Preliminary Report On The Special Supplemental Food Program

B-176994

Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service

*BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES*

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SEPT 28, 1973



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON D C 20548

B-176994

To the President of the Senate and the
Speaker of the House of Representatives

This is our preliminary report on the Special Supplemental Food Program as required by Public Law 92-433, approved September 26, 1972 (86 Stat. 724). This law amended the Child Nutrition Act of 1966 (42 U.S.C. 1771) by adding section 17 which established a program of cash grants to the States, to be carried out during fiscal years 1973 and 1974, to provide supplemental foods¹ through State and local agencies to pregnant or lactating women and to infants and children up to 4 years of age determined by competent professionals to be nutritional risks because of inadequate nutrition and income.

The law states that the Secretary of Agriculture shall use \$20 million in each of fiscal years 1973 and 1974 to carry out the program. For fiscal year 1973 the Secretary shall use funds appropriated by section 32 of the act of August 24, 1935 (7 U.S.C. 612(c)).² For fiscal year 1974 he shall use funds from the same source to the extent that funds are not appropriated specifically for the program

¹Defined in the act as those foods containing nutrients known to be lacking in the diets of populations at nutritional risk and, in particular, those foods and food products containing high quality protein, iron, calcium, vitamin A, and vitamin C. Also included is any commercially formulated food product specifically designed for infants.

²Section 32 is a permanent appropriation of funds to the Secretary of Agriculture in an amount equal to 30 percent of the gross customs receipts in the preceding year. The Secretary is authorized to use such funds for commodity program expenses designated in that section and for other purposes specified by the Congress in various statutes.

According to the legislative history, the program is to be operated on a pilot basis for a nationally representative sample of the target population.

Section 17(e) requires the State and local agencies to maintain adequate medical records on the participants to enable the Secretary to determine and evaluate the benefits of the nutritional assistance provided. Section 17(e) also requires the Secretary and the Comptroller General of the United States to submit to the Congress preliminary evaluation reports on the program by October 1, 1973. The act calls for both officials to submit to the Congress by March 30, 1974, reports containing an evaluation of the program and making recommendations on its continuation.

The program is administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), Department of Agriculture, and is called the WIC (women, infants, and children) program by that agency.

We (1) reviewed the program's authorizing legislation, the legislative history, and pertinent agency records, (2) held discussions with FNS officials responsible for planning the program's operation and evaluation, and (3) discussed FNS's plans with FNS's medical consultants and with physicians and others, including scientists and officials of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), working in the fields of nutrition and maternal and child health.

Because FNS did not plan to initiate individual projects before this report was due, we could not make a preliminary evaluation of project operations and program results. On the basis of our work to date, we are presenting information on the status of the program's implementation and certain potential problems concerning the planned medical evaluation of the program.

STATUS OF PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Although the legislative intent was to have the program in operation during fiscal years 1973 and 1974, projects will

not get underway until the second quarter of fiscal year 1974.¹ Agriculture officials have stated that, because the Congress has stressed the need for medical evaluation of the program, unusual problems were encountered in its development.

From September 1972, when Public Law 92-433 was enacted, until early in March 1973, Agriculture was involved in general planning and in negotiations regarding the feasibility of HEW's administering the program because Agriculture concluded it lacked the necessary medical expertise. By letter dated November 24, 1972, Agriculture requested HEW to explore the possibility of administering the program. By letter dated February 2, 1973, HEW declined, noting that (1) as communities would consider the program a food assistance program, it would seem logical and advantageous for its administration to remain with Agriculture and (2) there was no apparent legal authority for transferring responsibility for the program to HEW. HEW agreed, however, to provide professional technical assistance in the areas of medical evaluation and nutrition education and various other services--such as identification of eligible population groups--which might expedite the implementation of the program.

On March 6, 1973, a task force was established within FNS to begin program implementation. The task force wrote program regulations which describe, among other things (1) State agencies' responsibilities, (2) eligibility criteria for local agencies and individual participants, (3) application procedures for State and local agencies, and (4) record and reporting requirements. The regulations were published in the Federal Register of July 11, 1973, and became effective July 13, 1973. After discussions with medical consultants and HEW personnel, FNS issued on July 20, 1973, a request for contract proposals to medically evaluate the program.

The request for contract proposals called for the first projects to begin operations on or about October 1, 1973. All

¹FNS expenditures under the program for fiscal year 1973 totaled \$1,800, all for consultants' services.

participants who are enrolled in the program and for whom initial evaluation measures--such as length or height, weight, and blood tests--are taken before December 31, 1973, are to be evaluated. Infants and children will be evaluated at enrollment and at the end of their first 6 months in the program. Pregnant women will be evaluated at enrollment, at the 26th week of pregnancy, at delivery, and at 6 weeks after delivery. Data is to be collected until June 30, 1974, when program operations are scheduled to terminate. FNS anticipates having a final evaluation report available after September 30, 1974.

As of September 19, 1973, FNS was in the process of selecting a medical evaluator from the two proposals received in response to the request for contract proposals. It expected to award the contract on or about October 1, 1973. Also, as of September 19, FNS had received 296 project applications and approved one. FNS had also changed the estimated starting date for initiation of project operations to on or about November 1, 1973.

Court action on program's implementation

In June 1973 a suit¹ was brought on behalf of certain prospective program beneficiaries before the District Court of the United States for the District of Columbia. The suit asked that the Secretary and other Agriculture officials be enjoined from further delaying the implementation and operation of the program and from refusing to spend the total \$40 million legislated for the program.

On August 3, 1973, the court issued an order requiring the Secretary to process and approve applications which qualify for funding under the law and program regulations until the sum of \$40 million, including the \$20 million made available for fiscal year 1973, is expended for these purposes or until June 30, 1974, whichever shall occur first.

¹Dotson v. Butz, D.D.C., Civil Action 1210-73.

Department officials told us that an appeal of the portion of the court's order requiring carryover of fiscal year 1973 funds to fiscal year 1974 was under consideration

POTENTIAL MEDICAL EVALUATION PROBLEMS

The physicians and other persons working in the fields of nutrition and maternal and child health with whom we discussed FNS's plans informed us of potential problems concerning evaluation of the program. For example, in their opinion, a study based on a 6-month evaluation of program participants would not provide a sufficient basis on which to decide whether the program should be extended nationwide. Some of the problems cited were that, after 6 months, causes of medical findings could not be determined and the permanency of findings concerning infants could not be assessed. They believed that extending the feeding and evaluation period to between 12 and 18 months would significantly improve the reliability of evaluation conclusions.

They also questioned whether FNS would have as much time as it planned to enroll participants for evaluation. For example, it was noted that, in setting October 1 as the date for initiating projects and starting the evaluation, FNS had not allowed enough time for the projects to put food delivery systems into operation or for the evaluator to adequately train local staffs to take uniform measurements.

FNS officials told us that FNS's medical consultants believed that 6 months of feeding should be sufficient for a meaningful evaluation, if the number of participants were sufficiently large, and that results could be biased by changes in the community if measurements were taken over a significantly longer period, such as more than 1 year. FNS's consultants stated also, however, that a longer period of operation would enhance the probability of enrolling a sufficient number of participants for evaluation.

PROGRAM'S EFFECT ON INFANTS' MENTAL DEVELOPMENT
MAY NOT BE DETERMINED

The program's legislative history indicates that the medical evaluation of program participants should include a determination of the program's effects on mental as well as physical development of infants. Accordingly, FNS has included in its evaluation plan the measurement of infant head circumference as an indication of mental development. Also in its request for contract proposals to evaluate the program FNS has allowed for prospective evaluators to include additional measurements if they can justify that the measurements would add to the total evaluation.

FNS's medical consultants stated that measuring head circumference does not by itself provide sufficient information on an infant's mental development but that neither would any of the mental development tests now in use. They also noted that, in this type of study, accurate data on head circumference probably would not be obtained, unless those taking the measurements were very well trained.

Other physicians and persons working in the fields of nutrition and child health questioned whether any valid measure of mental development is possible in a study such as this. For example, scientists of HEW's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development stated that, on the basis of extensive experience in studies throughout the world, including the United States, there is no apparent single, or even relatively simple, test instrument for assessing mental development in malnourished children. They stated that, except in cases of severe malnutrition, the long term consequences of malnutrition appear to be more in behavioral areas, such as perseverance, attentiveness, and irritability, than in the strictly intellectual or cognitive areas which are very difficult to quantify.

They noted further that the problems of training testers, standardizing any behavioral test procedures, and quantifying the results of testing could be insurmountable for the size and type of study proposed.

MARCH 30, 1974, REPORTING DATE
MAY BE PREMATURE

Because FNS does not plan to complete its collection of evaluation data until June 30, 1974, and because analyzing such data will require additional time, it is unlikely that we will be able to submit to the Congress by March 30, 1974, as required, a report containing an adequate evaluation of the program and making recommendations concerning its continuation.

Legislation (H. R. 9639) currently being considered by the Congress would extend program operations through June 30, 1975, and establish new reporting dates. The proposed legislation would require preliminary evaluations by the Secretary and the Comptroller General not later than October 1, 1974, and reports containing evaluations of the program and making recommendations concerning its continuation not later than March 30, 1975.

The additional time allowed in the proposed legislation could be beneficial in terms of increased program participation and could allow development of more meaningful evaluation data on which to base recommendations.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE COMMENTS

Agriculture commented on matters discussed in this report (see app. I) stating that, although there were differences of opinion among the professionals consulted as to the optimal period of time to conduct the evaluation, the group agreed that within the remaining time allowed by the legislation, an adequate evaluation could be conducted if the sample size was sufficiently large. Agriculture stated that it recognized the problems inherent in the time available for medical evaluation under the existing legislation and that controversy existed among medical researchers regarding measurement of nutritional effects on mental development. Agriculture stated that it supported the pending legislation which would extend the program 1 year.

It said that the extension would

- allow an evaluation of infants born to mothers participating in the program and insure that more significant results would be obtained on the population studied,
- allow consideration of conducting tests appropriate to the evaluation time which would provide more documentation on the program's effects on mental development, and
- allow Agriculture to provide, in time for the Congress to evaluate the program, at least preliminary information based on a reasonable period of operation.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget, and the Secretaries of Agriculture and of Health, Education, and Welfare.



Deputy Comptroller General
of the United States

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOOD AND NUTRITION SERVICE
WASHINGTON D C 20250

Mr Richard J Woods, Assistant Director
Resources and Economic Development
DIVISION
United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D C 20548

SEP 11 1973

Dear Mr Woods

This letter comments on the draft of your preliminary report on the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children.

Potential Medical Evaluation Problems

The evaluation was designed to provide at least six months feeding time. Although there were differences of opinion among the professionals consulted as to the optimal period of time to conduct the evaluation, the group agreed that within the remaining time allowed by the legislation, an adequate evaluation could be conducted if the sample size was sufficiently large. However, the Department recognized the problems inherent in the time period involved and supports the pending legislation which would result in a program extension of one year. This time period would allow an evaluation of the infants born to mothers participating in the program in addition to insuring that more significant results will be obtained on the population studied.

Program Effect on Infants' Mental Development

As the report indicates, the program's legislative history calls for a determination of the program's effects on mental as well as physical development. To make this determination, medical consultants for the Department selected the head circumference test in an effort to obtain some measure of mental development over a short evaluation period. However, there is considerable controversy among medical researchers about measurement of nutritional effects on mental development and about what means, if any, of measuring mental development would be valid in a study of this nature.

Should an extension to the Program be approved by the Congress, tests appropriate to the evaluation time period may be conducted which would provide more documentation on the benefits of the program.

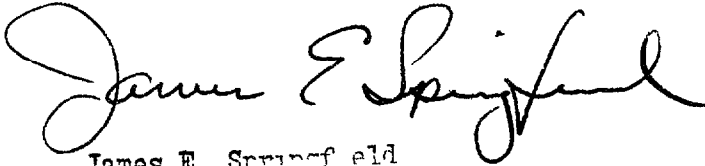
APPENDIX I

March 30, 1974 Reporting Date

An extension of one year with a resulting delay in reporting dates would allow the Department to provide at least preliminary information based on a reasonable period of operation in time for the Congress to evaluate the program. As indicated previously, we support the extension.

As you know, development of the Request for Proposals to evaluate the program involved a considerable effort on the part of the Department. Drs. Fomon and Pitkins from the University of Iowa assisted in development of the RFP. We consulted with Drs. Nichaman and Trowbridge and Miss Egan from DHEW, and were carefully monitored by GAO during the planning phase.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James E. Springfield". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

James E. Springfield
Deputy Administrator

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