
Actions Needed to Reduce Administrative Overlap among Domestic Food Assistance Programs

Why GAO Is Focusing on This Area

The federal government spent more than \$62.5 billion on 18 domestic food and nutrition assistance programs in fiscal year 2008. Programs' spending ranged from \$4 million for the smallest program to more than \$37 billion for the largest. These programs help ensure that millions of low-income individuals have consistent, dependable access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Programs provide nutrition assistance in a variety of forms, ranging from agricultural commodities to prepared meals to vouchers or other targeted benefits used in commercial food retail locations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service oversees most of these programs—including the five largest. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) also fund food assistance programs.

What GAO Has Found to Indicate Duplication, Overlap, or Fragmentation

Domestic food and nutrition assistance is provided through a decentralized system of primarily 18 different federal programs that shows signs of overlap and inefficient use of resources. In addition to USDA, HHS, DHS, and multiple state and local government and nonprofit organizations work together to administer a complex network of programs and providers. GAO has found that some of these programs provide comparable benefits to similar or overlapping populations. For example, individuals eligible for groceries through the Commodity Supplemental Food Program are also generally eligible for groceries through the Emergency Food Assistance Program and for targeted benefits that are redeemed in authorized stores through the largest program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—formerly the Food Stamp Program). The availability of multiple programs with similar benefits helps ensure that those in need have access to nutritious food, but can also increase administrative costs, which account for approximately a tenth to more than a quarter of total costs among the largest of these programs. In addition, GAO's previous work has shown that overlap among programs can lead to inefficient use of federal funds, duplication of effort, and confusion among those seeking services.

These 18 programs were created individually by Congress over the past several decades to address a variety of emerging needs, such as targeting benefits to groups at high risk of malnutrition or hunger. Agency officials and local providers have indicated that the multiple food assistance programs work together and provide various points of entry to the system to help increase access to food for vulnerable or target populations. Those officials and providers told us that, since no one program alone is intended to meet a household's full nutritional needs, the variety of food assistance

programs can help households fill gaps and address the specific needs of individual members.

Despite the potential benefits of varied points of entry, program rules related to determining eligibility often require the collection of similar information by multiple entities. For example, six programs—the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Summer Food Service Program, the Special Milk Program, and the Child and Adult Care Food Program—all provide food to eligible children in settings outside the home, such as at school, day care, or summer day camps. Most of the 18 programs have specific and often complex legal requirements and administrative procedures that federal, state, and local organizations follow to help manage each program’s resources. According to previous GAO work and state and local officials, rules that govern these and other nutrition assistance programs often require applicants who seek assistance from multiple programs to submit separate applications for each program and provide similar information verifying, for example, household income. This can create unnecessary work for both providers and applicants and may result in the use of more administrative resources than needed.

Moreover, not enough is known about the effectiveness of many of these programs. Research suggests that participation in 7 of the 18 programs—including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program, and SNAP—is associated with positive health and nutrition outcomes consistent with programs’ goals, such as raising the level of nutrition among low-income households, safeguarding the health and well-being of the nation’s children, and strengthening the agricultural economy. Yet little is known about the effectiveness of the remaining 11 programs because they have not been well studied. As part of its broader recommendation GAO suggested that USDA consider which of the lesser-studied programs need further research, and USDA agreed to consider the value of examining potential inefficiencies and overlap among smaller programs

Actions Needed and Potential Financial or Other Benefits

Actions to address food assistance programs’ overlap and inefficiencies are needed to better leverage government resources. Provided such actions are balanced with the program goals of serving eligible vulnerable and low-income individuals and the need to maintain program integrity, creating efficiencies could put these agencies in a position to better assist program participants while decreasing administrative burdens. In April 2010, GAO recommended that USDA identify and develop methods for

addressing potential inefficiencies and reducing unnecessary overlap among its smaller food assistance programs while ensuring that those who are eligible receive the assistance they need. These methods could include conducting a study as a first step; convening a group of experts; identifying which of the lesser-studied programs need further research and taking steps to fill the research gap; or identifying and piloting proposed changes. To date, USDA has not taken action on this recommendation.

One of the possible methods for reducing program inefficiencies would entail USDA broadening its efforts to simplify, streamline, or better align eligibility procedures and criteria across programs to the extent that it is permitted by law. For example, the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 requires sharing of data between SNAP and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to allow automatic eligibility for NSLP without further application. According to USDA officials, by the 2008-2009 school year, 78 percent of local educational agencies directly certified SNAP-participant children for free school meals, which increased administrative efficiency and reduced improper payments. While privacy concerns and incompatible data systems pose challenges, expanding these efforts across programs could further improve efficiency. Because the legislative and regulatory eligibility criteria for the various entitlement programs are not identical, with some more stringent than others, changes to better align eligibility criteria could result in either fewer or more eligible individuals. Nevertheless, such efforts could result in sizable administrative cost savings since, as noted earlier, they are a large part of program costs.

Options such as consolidating or eliminating overlapping programs also have the potential to reduce administrative costs but may not reduce spending on benefits unless fewer individuals are served as a result. For example, in fiscal years 2007, 2008, and 2009, USDA proposed eliminating the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which targets low-income pregnant women, children, and persons age 60 or over, but Congress continued to fund the program. USDA viewed this program as duplicative of other programs, and eliminating the program would have yielded close to \$140 million savings in fiscal year 2008. However, according to agency officials, because the program is targeted to particularly vulnerable groups, elimination of the program would likely increase enrollment in programs such as WIC, reducing overall savings. As part of any effort to significantly change the nutrition assistance benefit delivery system, care must be taken to understand the likely effects on target populations. Nevertheless, GAO believes opportunities exist for reducing costs and improving the efficiency of nutrition assistance programs.

Framework for Analysis

The information contained in this analysis builds upon prior GAO work, which is cited below.

Related GAO Products

Domestic Food Assistance: Complex System Benefits Millions, but Additional Efforts Could Address Potential Inefficiency and Overlap among Smaller Programs. GAO-10-346. Washington, D.C.: April 15, 2010.

School Meal Programs: Experiences of the States and Districts That Eliminated Reduced-price Fees. GAO-09-584. Washington, D.C.: July 17, 2009.

Food Stamp Program: Options for Delivering Financial Incentives to Participants for Purchasing Targeted Foods. GAO-08-415. Washington, D.C.: July 30, 2008.

Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service: Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC): Revisions in the WIC Food Packages. GAO-08-358R. Washington, D.C.: December 17, 2007.

Nutrition Education: USDA Provides Services through Multiple Programs, but Stronger Linkages among Efforts Are Needed. GAO-04-528. Washington, D.C.: April 27, 2004.

Federal Food Safety and Security System: Fundamental Restructuring Is Needed to Address Fragmentation and Overlap. GAO-04-588T. Washington, D.C.: March 30, 2004.

Food Stamp Program: Steps Have Been Taken to Increase Participation of Working Families, but Better Tracking of Efforts Is Needed. GAO-04-346. Washington, D.C.: March 5, 2004.

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