



At The Table

Nutrition assistance news and information for partners and community organizations



Message from the Regional Administrator

2008 was a year of significant events, affecting our program recipients as well as our Federal, State and local partners. We experienced devastating natural disasters that challenged our states and tribes to respond, a dramatic decline in our economy, and major program changes.



Darlene Barnes,
Regional Administrator

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The Supplemental Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is in the process of implementing the new Food Package, one of the largest changes ever in the program. The revised food package rules incorporate the 2005 Dietary Guidelines and are being phased in between February 2008 and August 2009. Another major change is that the former Food Stamp Program is transitioning to its new name, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

While experiencing these changes, we have also seen a devastating economic downturn, causing the public need for our programs to rise steeply. More than 31 million Americans used SNAP benefits in September, the highest number since the 1960s. News stories appear daily about the increase in SNAP applications.

What do these events mean for our region and our states? It means that state employees are having to devote more hours to policy changes and to receiving and processing SNAP applications. It means that we have to continue to work with states to streamline the technology for accepting and processing applications. It also means that we have to be sure that our programs are easily accessed by those who need them, by reaching out to community advocates and organizations to get the word out.

Despite the difficulties during the year, we have also seen many triumphs in the region. One success has been the number of schools around the region who have worked hard and earned either a Gold or Silver Healthier US School Challenge rating. To earn this status, schools have to meet stringent requirements regarding the nutritional content and food choices in their meals as well as their emphasis on physical education. The application guidelines will change some in 2009 as the requirements become better aligned with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines.

Mountain Plains staff traveled to schools and presented awards at several school ceremonies during 2008. Each gathering was a positive celebration and acknowledgement of the importance of good nutrition and physical activity in

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Nancy M. Johner
Under Secretary
Food, Nutrition & Consumer Services



A Message from the Under Secretary

By Nancy Johner, FNCS Under Secretary

Our Nation has provided nutrition assistance to low income individuals for many years. Now more than ever, strong partnerships are critical to the success of programs that work at the grass roots level to reach members of vulnerable populations. Federal, State and local government, food banks, local faith and community-based organizations, and others on the front lines should work together to ensure everyone who is eligible for nutrition assistance can access it with dignity and respect.

A very positive example of results gained by strong partnerships is the response of Federal, State and local officials working with community organizations and individual citizens to provide crucial support to those affected by the Midwest floods, as well as Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. Our commitment to ensure all Americans have access to good nutrition is not reserved for natural disasters, nor is the generosity of the American people seen only during the holiday season. The work of FNS and the food community is one of constant dedication, involving volunteers from a variety of organizations and backgrounds to answer a critical call to action when necessary.

Since 2001, funding for nutrition assistance has increased to \$60.1 billion – representing a 76 percent increase. During this timeframe, almost 10.5 million more low-income children and individuals received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP (previously known as Food Stamp) benefits. At the same time, the percentage of eligible individuals participating in the program rose from 54 percent in 2001 to its current rate of 67 percent. Our partners at food pantries and soup kitchens work tirelessly to help low-income families begin the enrollment process and distribute needed food packages or warm meals. Compassionate efforts such as these put healthy food within reach for over 29 million individuals each month in SNAP and empower them to achieve self-sufficiency.

Child nutrition programs have experienced increases in participation and access as well. Today, 31 million children participate in school lunch each day, and more than 10 million participate in school breakfast. Since 2001, more than 2.4 million more low-income children ate a free or reduced-price school lunch and 1.75 million more ate a free or reduced-price school breakfast. School meals are nutritionally balanced based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and ensure that children have access to the healthful foods they need to support academic achievement.

Federal programs like SNAP and the child nutrition programs are the foundation of USDA's efforts to fight hunger and improve nutrition. Individual and corporate donations to food banks and other emergency feeding sites are just as important. Citizen volunteers who give their time, money, and knowledge to improve the lives of their neighbors and communities are the cornerstone of our critical partnerships.

During this holiday season and beyond, our nutrition assistance network is collaborating through a variety of channels to combat food insecurity. If you wish to help, we encourage you to volunteer time, donate food items, and spread the word about our important nutrition assistance programs. Together, we can build healthier communities and a stronger nation by ensuring that no one in America goes hungry. To find ways you can help, please visit www.fns.usda.gov/fns/.

States Celebrate HealthierUS Schools Gold and Silver Awards



Mountain Plains Regional Administrator Darlene Barnes presents the Gold Award to Ponderosa Elementary School in Billings, MT, on October 10.



Burlington-Des Lacs School Food Service Staff are joined by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Wayne Sanstead, FNS Mountain Plains Special Nutrition Programs Director Darlene Sanchez, North Dakota State staffers Deb Egeland and Becky King, and School Principal Jean Klein during their Gold School celebration on October 21.



Students at Hawthorne Elementary School in Bozeman, MT, join the Power Panther in an October 9 celebration of their Gold School status.



Burlington-Des Lacs School in North Dakota proudly announced its Gold School Award on the marquis outside the school.

At right: Students and teachers from Golva School in Golva, ND, pose with their new HealthierUS Gold School Banner. SNP Director Sanchez, Golva Principal Julie Zook, state nutrition staff Deb Egeland and Becky King, and the Power Panther also joined the students. The entire school -- which has 30 students K-8 -- squeezed into the photo following their celebration on October 20.



States Celebrate HealthierUS Schools Gold and Silver Awards: National School Lunch Week in Iowa



East Elementary School students and staff accept their Gold Award in Knoxville, IA, October 16.



Regional Special Nutrition Programs Director Darlene Sanchez visits with students at St Mathew School in Cedar Rapids, IA, following the presentation of a Gold Award on October 15.



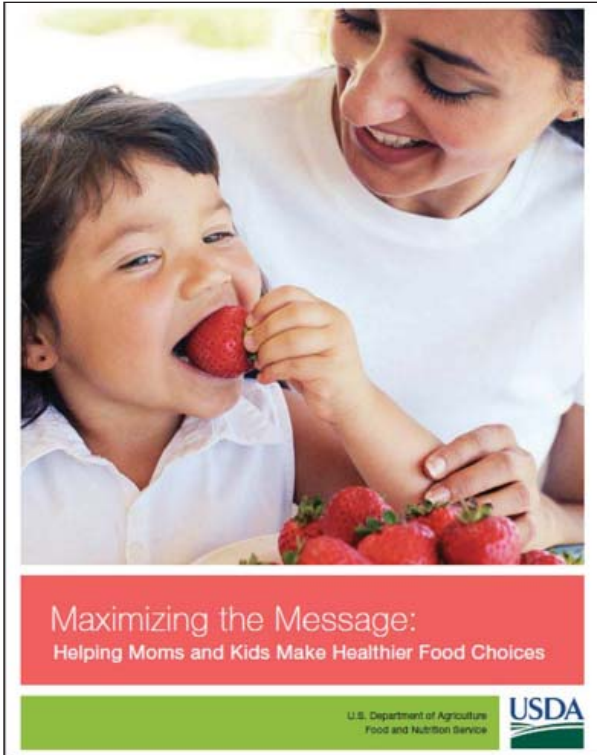
Mountain Plains Regional Administrator Darlene Barnes presents the Gold Award to West Elementary School in Knoxville, IA, October 16.



Power Panther celebrates a Gold Award with staff and students at Northstar Elementary in Knoxville, IA, October 16.

Celebrations Expected in the Spring:
GOLD: Jefferson and Washington Elementary Schools, Valley City, ND
SILVER: Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Buchanan Elementary Schools, Huron, South Dakota.

Food and Nutrition Service Offers New Core Nutrition Education Messages



USDA Food and Nutrition Service recently released a set of 16 consumer-tested nutrition education messages that can help educators reach out to the target audiences of low-income mothers and children.

“Maximizing the Message: Helping Moms and Kids Make Healthier Food Choices” (shown at left) is a booklet that includes the messages, guidance for using them, tip and recipes.

Our partners are encouraged to use the messages, supporting content, and guidance to expand and enhance current education activities, support new WIC food package policies and facilitate the development of new initiatives.

Key features of the materials include:

- Development was guided by a workgroup of internal and external experts in nutrition education, communication and the FNS programs.
- Messages are based on findings from 30 focus-groups conducted with low-income mothers and children, over half of whom were participating in FNS programs.
- Messages are accurate, easy-to-read and emotionally based.
- Messages are consistent with the 2005 Dietary Guidelines and MyPyramid and support program-based nutrition education as well as cross-program education initiatives such as those outlined in the State Nutrition Action Plans.

For more information and to download the message booklet go to:

<http://www.fns.usda.gov/corenutritionmessages/Maximizing.htm>

Sample messages For 8- to 10-Year-Old Children

(Note: Milk and yogurt messages must be paired with image depicting low-fat or fat-free milk or yogurt.)

1. Eat smart to play hard. Drink milk at meals.
2. Fuel up with milk at meals. And soar through your day like a rocket ship.
3. Snack like a super hero. Power up with fruit and yogurt.
4. Eat smart to play hard. Eat fruits and veggies at meals and snacks.
5. Fuel up with fruits and veggies. And soar through your day like a rocket ship.

Message from the Administrator *continued from page 1*

a healthy lifestyle. Schools held assemblies, invited people from the community, and some of the students sang songs and performed skits about good nutrition. Congratulations to all the schools and thank you for your hard work.

In SNAP, many of our states were recognized for excellence in administering their programs. Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Kansas, and Missouri all received financial bonuses for excellence in administering and improving access to their programs.

We hosted a forum in Denver in June to discuss opportunities to reach out more to senior citizens. We held another forum to gather input from citizens and professionals about our child nutrition programs, for which we had a wonderful turnout.

We must continue to thank all of you, our partners, for doing the front-line work of the programs our agency administers. So much of our communication to our clients is through you. In 2009, our hope is

to continue to expand our partnerships, reaching out to more organizations that work with our target communities. The agency, as a whole, is working hard on this objective at a national level, while we continue to work with you here in our region. Our partners include, but are not limited to, state, city and county governments; food banks; churches; schools; school districts; departments of education and health; non-profits; advocates; individuals and volunteers; and media outlets.

In all, it was a busy but good year. We know we can expect changes ahead, as the new administration takes over this month. We never know how long it will be before we hear who our new Under Secretary will be. But until then, our work continues on the same path of fulfilling our mission to provide children and needy families better access to food and good nutrition through our programs.

We wish you a Happy 2009 and look forward to continuing our work together. ♦

Power Panther Costume Available Through September '09

The Food and Nutrition Service National Office has announced that the Power Panther costume will be retired from use after September 30, 2009. The costume was launched in 2000, and has been popular with our state and agency partners. The agency will be unable to continue using the costume due to the expense of maintenance and shipping.

Power Panther and Eat Smart. Play Hard.™ promotional materials are

currently available from the Regional Offices, and more are expected to be produced in the future. FNS will continue the Eat Smart. Play Hard.™ motto.

There is no word yet about whether the costumes will be available for purchase.

So, this is a reminder to book the costume now if you're interested in using it before September!



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At the Table is produced for our partners throughout the Mountain Plains Region. If someone you know has an interest in our programs, we would be happy to add them to our distribution list.

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