

# Nutrition Program Quality Assurance through a Formalized Process of On-site Program Review

Joan Doyle Paddock, MPH, RD; Jamie Dollahite, PhD, RD

## ABSTRACT

A protocol for a systematic onsite review of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program–Education was developed to support quality programming and ensure compliance with state guidelines and federal regulations. Onsite review of local nutrition program operations is one strategy to meet this goal. Observation and interaction with staff allow a comprehensive understanding of strengths, weaknesses, and emerging issues. This information provides managers with timely feedback to strengthen and improve all aspects of nutrition programming.

**Key Words:** Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, Supplemental Nutrition Education Program–Education, quality assurance, program management, evaluation (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2012;44:183-188.)

## INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance is a critical process to ensure excellence in delivery of community nutrition programs such as the Supplemental Food Assistance Program–Education (SNAP-Ed) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP).<sup>1</sup> In New York State (NYS), these programs are funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and delivered through local county Cooperative Extension associations. Faculty and staff in the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University have the responsibility of providing statewide leadership, including monitoring programs and providing technical assistance aimed at ensuring quality. Tools and processes for these activities are not predetermined by the USDA but are at the discretion of each state leadership team. This article describes the protocol for a systematic onsite review of local EFNEP and SNAP-Ed programs developed in NYS to support quality programming and ensure compliance with state guidelines and federal regulations.

EFNEP serves low-income families with children.<sup>2</sup> SNAP-Ed serves indi-

viduals receiving or eligible for SNAP benefits, ie, at 130% or less of the federal poverty level.<sup>3</sup> In NYS, 34 county extension offices have EFNEP and SNAP-Ed; an additional 23 offices have SNAP-Ed only. Education is delivered by front-line, paraprofessional educators in both EFNEP and SNAP-Ed. These staff are supervised and the program is managed by a professional extension educator with degrees in nutrition, public health, health education, or family and consumer sciences. A county executive director is responsible for all programs in a local Extension office. The 57 counties with EFNEP or SNAP-Ed are divided into 7 geographic regions, each with a regional coordinator who is a master's level nutrition professional. Regional coordinators provide training and facilitate communication for their group of counties.

Nutrition education is delivered in a similar fashion in both programs. Research-based curricula are reviewed by state leadership, and those deemed of sufficient quality are available for use in the NYS programs. Annually, county managers choose among these curricula according to the perceived needs of the population they are able

to reach and the interest of staff and commit to using these for the year. A minimum series of 6 lessons is delivered in one on one (usually in participant's home in rural areas) or in small groups (3-15 participants). Enrollment procedures and records are maintained in a similar manner for both programs. Evaluation data are collected pre- and posteducation and include demographics, a self-reported behavior checklist, and a 24-hour recall. The behavior checklist includes 10 items federally mandated for EFNEP and an additional 8 to 11 items chosen from the national Nutrition Education Evaluation Reporting System–5 (USDA, Washington, DC, 2008) to assess the behavioral constructs identified in the curriculum being delivered, ie, the additional items are matched to the curriculum. Evaluation data are submitted electronically to the state office with the County Reporting System–5, designed to collect local data and feed them into the Nutrition Education Evaluation Reporting System–5.

Nutritional sciences faculty and staff provide nutrition leadership for both programs, as well as administrative oversight for EFNEP. Administrative oversight for SNAP-Ed is provided by the NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, the state agency that administers SNAP. Nutrition program policies and procedures, educational strategies and materials, staff training, professional development, and technical assistance are

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Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

Address for correspondence: Joan Doyle Paddock, MPH, RD, 301 MVR, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14843; Phone: (607) 255-7715; Fax: (607) 255-0027; E-mail: jed36@cornell.edu

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coordinated by a team of Cornell campus-based staff in the Food and Nutrition Education in Communities unit. Ensuring that local strategies to achieve goals are appropriate and progress is being made toward output and outcome goals is the responsibility of this unit.

A variety of methods is used to monitor program operations. Electronic submission of pre- and post-education evaluation data by county staff is required quarterly and is systematically reviewed by campus staff. A feedback process that includes e-mail communication to county data managers is in place to clarify questions when data do not fit expected patterns of quality (eg, number of participants enrolled per full-time equivalent staff). However, monitoring county data is an incomplete assessment of program operations. Achieving a high level of confidence that local programs are operating as expected requires onsite observation of staff in action within the context in which they work.

An onsite visit by campus staff is an opportunity to emphasize the importance of nutrition programming, demonstrate support for nutrition supervisors and paraprofessional educators, strengthen communication between campus management staff and individual nutrition educators, strengthen communication among programs within regions, reinforce best practices, assess uniform application of policies and procedures, and solicit direct input for staff development. To this end, a protocol for review of program operations was developed to ensure that (1) best practices are incorporated into research-based nutrition education in a manner that meets program expectations, and that (2) all federal requirements and state guidelines are met.

Quality assurance is the process of monitoring program operations against established standards of service delivery or care.<sup>4</sup> The accuracy of nutrition information provided, the use of research-based adult education techniques, and the nature of interactions with participants are all aspects of standards for quality program delivery. Each of the federal nutrition programs has specific definitions of target audience, nutrition education content, and delivery

methods. However, procedures for ensuring program standards and quality are at the discretion of the state leadership and should be uniquely designed to address program delivery in context. State-level stewardship of federal resources must include a review of required outputs and outcomes. Application of an assessment process that highlights and reinforces quality programming and values and rewards excellence strengthens the entire nutrition education program from the local to the federal level.

### QUALITY ASSURANCE PROTOCOL

A standard but flexible protocol was developed for a systematic review of nutrition programs conducted by Cornell Cooperative Extension staff in 2000. The goal was for a team of campus staff to visit each county at least once every 2 years. Before this, site visits were conducted on an irregular cycle and no standard data collection or reporting protocol was used.

The development of the protocol, reporting system, and follow-up procedures was intended to serve as a means of improving nutrition program quality and identify needs for training and support. Unlike other compliance reviews, the intent is quality assurance in nutrition education, recordkeeping, and staff performance. Specifically, the team reviews program management, communication among staff at all levels, recruitment and retention of program participants, and educational strategies, including materials used, quality of group facilitation, completeness and management of data, and staff development. The process includes review criteria consistent with the "Food Stamp Nutrition Education Management Evaluation Review Guide for State Management Evaluation Reviewers."<sup>5</sup> This document is used by regional Food and Nutrition Service staff to review state plans and state operations whose purpose is to "ensure that operations comply with the requirements of Nutrition Education State Plan Guidance and are consistent with the approved plan." The NYS protocol takes into account the concerns of the federal programs for state-level management and incorpo-

rates state-specific guidelines for quality program delivery at the local level.

The site visit team was made up of 2 to 4 members, depending on the size of the county program. The team included some combination of state-level staff (unit director; program coordinator; staff responsible for data management, including training of staff on data collection and reporting; and staff responsible for nutrition materials and curriculum) plus 1 regional coordinator. A regional coordinator from another region in the state usually participated to provide an outside perspective. Team members were assigned leadership for different tasks: record review, meetings, and observations. All or most of the team meets with the nutrition manager and paraprofessional educators and participates in record review.

The site visit is a day-long process that provides an opportunity for fact finding and dialogue. Information is gathered through interview, observation, and document review (Table 1). Meetings with the executive director and nutrition supervisor include an overview of the visit purpose and schedule and introduction of the team members, as well as opportunity to discuss local issues that affect nutrition programs. Individual meetings with the local Cooperative Extension executive director, nutrition supervisor, and paraprofessional educators are the most intensive portions of the site visit, requiring 2.5 to 3 hours in total. Observation of a group or individual nutrition education session takes about an hour. Review of records, including group and individual progression records, attendance records, and lesson plans, can take the team up to 2 hours.

### Tools

A variety of tools was developed to streamline scheduling, data collection, record review, and report writing for the site visit, including an appointment letter template, interview form, record review form, lesson observation form, and report template.

*Appointment template.* A standard letter for confirming the date, schedule of activities, and staff participating

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