Identifying Emergency Preparedness and Readiness to Respond to Issues Faced by School Nutrition Professionals

National Food Service Management Institute
The University of Mississippi
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The University of Mississippi

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

The National Food Service Management Institute was authorized by Congress in 1989 and established in 1990 at The University of Mississippi in Oxford and is operated in collaboration with The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. The Institute operates under a grant agreement with the United States Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

PURPOSE
The purpose of the National Food Service Management Institute is to improve the operation of child nutrition programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination.

MISSION
The mission of the National Food Service Management Institute is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of child nutrition programs.

VISION
The vision of the National Food Service Management Institute is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in child nutrition programs.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

School nutrition (SN) professionals have the responsibility of providing meals at scheduled times every day that schools are in session. Emergencies, which can include natural disasters, acts of violence, or illness, can occur anywhere with little or no warning and may cause short- or long-term food service disruptions. During an emergency, SN directors may face the challenge of providing meals despite damaged or inoperable food production facilities. A variety of emergency preparedness (EP) resources are available to SN professionals to address various emergencies that occur in schools (Story, 2006). However, research is limited on the effectiveness of EP resources in research literature. Although there is no federal requirement or mandate for emergency plans in schools at the time of this report; many states have laws or regulations requiring schools to develop, implement, and evaluate EP plans and conduct emergency drills on a regular basis (Council on School Health, 2008; United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], Food and Nutrition Service [FNS], 2004).

The purpose of this study was to identify SN directors’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their EP plan and the directors’ role in evaluating and implementing procedures to assure safe and nutritious food for students during emergency situations. The study was conducted in two phases. Phase I consisted of an expert panel of SN directors and state agency personnel representing the seven United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regions that had assisted in the development of EP policies/procedures and/or had experienced an emergency in their SN program. The expert panel met at the site of the National Food Service Management
Institute, Applied Research Division (NFSMI, ARD). The agenda for the meeting was planned so that the issues addressed during the panel’s discussions supported the development of a survey for Phase II of the research study. During the meeting, panel discussion topics included:

- common elements of EP plans;
- the extent to which EP plans were followed during an emergency/crisis;
- methods to evaluate the effectiveness of EP plans;
- types of training for EP;
- barriers to implementing an EP plan;
- expected and unexpected outcomes of emergency planning; and
- coordination among SN program personnel and other stakeholders to address emergencies.

A summary of the expert panel discussions was sent to panelists to confirm. The researchers then utilized the data to draft a quantitative survey in Phase II. A review panel of 14 SN professionals, including six members of the expert panel, examined and piloted the survey instrument and related documents. Revisions were made according to review panel recommendations. The survey was then formatted, printed, and mailed to a random sample of 700 SN directors representing the seven USDA geographic regions.

A total of 182 surveys were returned for a response rate of 26%. A majority (56.1%) of SN directors indicated that they had more than five years tenure in their current positions and were experienced in managing emergency situations. All respondents reported having an EP plan of which two-thirds (66.5%) of them were using their district’s plan and one-third (33.5%) reported maintaining a separate SN EP plan. Additionally, respondents reported that EP plans had been implemented in a variety of emergency situations with lockdowns (51.4%) and power
failures (41.3%) as the most commonly reported emergency events. The majority of the respondents (52.8%) indicated that they were unaware of major barriers to successfully implement their most recent EP plan. However, the challenges cited most frequently (16%) were lack of staff to implement the plan and missing elements of the plan to guide in recovery efforts (29.7%). SN directors indicated that security provisions for deliveries (28%) and information about funding and other resources for emergencies (19.8%) were also necessary elements missing from EP plans. After experiencing a crisis, respondents indicated that they had provided advice and suggestions (54.5%) that contributed to the development, implementation, and revision of EP plans and served on committees to address EP issues (40.4%). Most respondents (63.9%) perceived that their current EP plan is effective for all types of emergencies but more training is needed in food safety/sanitation (83.1%), maintaining foodservice operations during emergencies (76.2%), EP drills (72.1%), and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point management system (70.9%). Results of this study will provide baseline information for assessments of SN EP plans as well as develop resources and training materials to enhance SN professionals’ ability to respond and recover from a variety of emergency situations.