

Competencies, Knowledge, and Skills Needed for State Agency Child Nutrition Professionals in the 21st Century



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National Food Service Management Institute 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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COMPETENCIES, KNOWLEDGE, AND SKILLS NEEDED FOR STATE AGENCY CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The passage of the National School Lunch Act of 1946 initiated an on-going partnership among the federal government, states, and local school districts to provide healthy, nutritious meals and snacks to the nation's children. Career child nutrition (CN) professionals are employed by state agencies to oversee the CN programs. Their responsibilities include planning, administering, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating all aspects of CN programs to ensure that meals served to clients by local school districts and other program sponsors are nutritious, age appropriate, appealing, and cost effective.

The National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI) conducted research that led to the identification of the competencies, knowledge and skills needed by CN technicians, managers, and district directors/supervisors. Little information is available about the needs of state agency CN professionals; thus, the purpose of this project was to identify the competencies, knowledge and skills needed by CN professionals working in state agency positions. The specific objectives of this project were the following:

- Determine the competencies associated with each of the job functional areas previously identified.
- Identify literature- and experience-based competency statements.
- Develop and verify literature- and experience-based job knowledge statements.
- Develop and verify literature- and experience-based skill statements.
- Associate job knowledge statements with the appropriate competency area.

- Associate the job skill statements with the appropriate competency area.
- Determine the time frame in which each knowledge or skill is needed by state agency CN professionals.

To accomplish these objectives, the researchers used the following definitions:

- **State agency child nutrition professionals:** The individuals employed by the CN state agency, such as nutrition program specialists, administrative personnel, and financial specialists who work with the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Food Distribution Program, Child and Adult Care Food Program, and Summer Food Service Program. For the purpose of this research, the roles of clerical and support staff were not addressed.
- **Functional areas:** The broad groupings or divisions of job responsibilities performed by the CN professionals within the state agency.
- **Competencies:** The areas of expertise and accountability within each functional area necessary to ensure that the purpose(s) of the job are met.
- **Knowledge:** The information a person has in specific content areas that is necessary for successful performance.
- **Skills:** The abilities to perform certain physical and/or mental tasks that are necessary for successful performance.

The research project was conducted in two phases. Phase I was conducted using an expert panel of ten CN state directors and state agency staff to bring about consensus on the job competencies and knowledge and skill statements needed by state agency CN professionals. The panel's evaluation resulted in the identification of 25 competencies and 180 knowledge and skill statements. This information was incorporated into an electronic survey sent to 84 CN

professionals serving in state agencies across the nation. They were asked to verify whether the knowledge and skill statements are important to the job responsibilities of a state agency CN professional, confirm whether the competency statements are consistent with the supporting knowledge and skill statements, and categorize the knowledge and skill statements into two distinct groups, *when hired* and *advanced*, to indicate the time frame in which the knowledge or skill is needed.

The electronic survey consisted of six functional areas determined in previous research, and the related competencies and knowledge and skill statements (69 knowledge statements and 111 skill statements). The review panel verified 24 competency statements, 66 knowledge statements, and 104 skill statements. From these statements, only 34 statements were identified as needed *when hired*, and 136 statements were identified as *advanced*, requiring additional experience and knowledge.

The competencies, knowledge and skill statements confirmed in this research, and the six functional areas determined in previous research, provide a clear picture of the role of CN professionals at the state level. United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and state agency administrators can apply the knowledge and skill statements to design job descriptions, and then use them as a framework for administrators to evaluate the effectiveness of state agency CN professionals. The competencies, knowledge and skills can assist in identifying agency personnel who demonstrate the potential to advance within the agency. They can form the basis for mentoring and other succession planning activities to prepare CN professionals for state agency-level responsibilities.

The review panel identified the time frame in which each knowledge and skill statement is needed by CN professionals to perform at the state agency level. Respondents considered the

majority (80%) of the knowledge and skill statements to be *advanced*. Research outcomes imply that state agency CN professionals begin their service at a basic competency level, and training and improvement opportunities will be provided while on the job to reach the advanced level of practice identified by the review panel. The information gained from this study will be an important resource to assist NFSMI, USDA, and state agencies in developing appropriate educational materials and resources for CN professionals working at the state agency level.