

Investigation of the Job Functions and Training Needs of State Agency Child Nutrition Professionals



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

Building the Future Through Child Nutrition

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PURPOSE

The purpose of NFSMI is to improve the operation of Child Nutrition Programs through research, education and training, and information dissemination. The Administrative Offices and Divisions of Information Services and Education and Training are located in Oxford. The Division of Applied Research is located at The University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg.

MISSION

The mission of the NFSMI is to provide information and services that promote the continuous improvement of Child Nutrition Programs.

VISION

The vision of the NFSMI is to be the leader in providing education, research, and resources to promote excellence in Child Nutrition Programs.

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**INVESTIGATION OF THE JOB FUNCTIONS AND TRAINING NEEDS
OF STATE AGENCY CHILD NUTRITION PROFESSIONALS**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objectives of this project were to investigate the job functions of child nutrition (CN) professionals working in state agencies, to describe the educational level and employment backgrounds of these CN professionals, and to identify current training provided to state agency staff. An electronic survey was developed utilizing a commercial survey development tool. It was sent via e-mail to state agency directors. A response rate of 65% was achieved.

Results indicated that CN professionals in state agencies perform a wide variety of tasks. A majority of CN professionals have completed graduate level coursework. During their first year of employment, most CN professionals received training from individuals within their own state agency unit. Most initial training was on-the-job with mentoring enhancing the process. The majority of training methods utilized by the state agency were individual learning techniques.

The major sources of professional development opportunities for CN professionals in their first year of employment are the School Nutrition Association, professional association conferences/workshops, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Later opportunities are provided by USDA/FNS, state agency staff, and professional organizations. Webinars and Web-based modules also were cited as sources of professional development opportunities for CN professionals.

The second phase of the project was a review of job descriptions and organizational charts submitted by state agency directors. A response rate of 38% was achieved. A review and

contextual analysis of the job descriptions indicated a preliminary identification of 12 major themes within the job descriptions. The preliminary themes served as identified words/phrases for electronic searches of each job description. Thirty significant themes were identified from the job descriptions. The results of this study can be used to identify job functions and training methods, needs, and skills required for CN professionals to conduct reviews and provide technical assistance. The themes can aid in determining the functions, competencies, and skills needed to perform as an effective CN professional working in a state agency. The information gained from this small sample also may be used to form the foundation for a larger electronic survey administered to a nationwide cohort of CN professionals.

INTRODUCTION

The federal government maintains an on-going partnership with states and local entities to provide healthy, nutritious meals and snacks to the Nation's children. The first federally mandated child nutrition (CN) program was the National School Lunch Program of 1946 (Gunderson, 1971). Additional nutrition assistance programs have been established since, such as the School Breakfast Program, Special Milk Program, Summer Food Service Program, Team Nutrition, the Child and Adult Care Food Program, and the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) (Martin, 2008).

The role of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in ensuring healthy, nutritious meals and snacks to children is to define state responsibility, establish national standards, and maintain general supervision. The state educational agency is typically responsible for program administration. States enter into an agreement with the USDA that outlines the receipt and disbursement of funds and foods and the supervision of the programs to ensure compliance with federal regulations (Gunderson, 1971).

Career professionals are employed by state agencies to oversee the CN programs. Their responsibilities include planning, administering, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating all aspects of the 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. Depending on the size of the state and the CN program, state-level responsibilities may be allocated into multiple positions.

State agencies play a key role as the liaison between the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and the local CN program sponsors. State agencies receive federal rules and regulations governing each nutrition assistance program from USDA, FNS, they assist local program sponsors in complying with program regulations, and many coordinate/provide training and technical assistance to program sponsors (Hopgood, 2008).

The environment in which CN programs operate is complex, dynamic, and changing at an ever more rapid pace. CN programs have evolved from small operations into, in some cases, multi-million dollar enterprises run as a business within a community, institution, or school setting. However, limited literature was found that focused on the roles of state agency staff overseeing CN programs (Harper, Sullivan & Hightower, 2002; Sneed, Oakley, & Ellis, 2006). Thus, the objectives of this project were to investigate the job functions of CN professionals working in state agencies, describe the educational level and employment background of these CN professionals, and identify current training provided to state agency staff.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized two phases to explore the job functions performed by state agency staff who administer and oversee federally funded child nutrition (CN) programs. In Phase I, an electronic survey was developed by the researchers guided by project objectives and reviewed by a panel of experts in the fields of education, foodservice management, and survey development. The survey was revised based on recommendations from the expert panel members' review, and an invitation to take the survey was e-mailed to state agency directors. In Phase II, job descriptions and organizational charts were submitted by respondents and reviewed by the researchers. Job tasks were categorized to identify significant themes in the activities performed by CN professionals employed in state agencies.

Informed Consent

The Human Subjects Protection Review Committee of The University of Southern Mississippi approved the protocol for the research project. The anonymity of participating state agency directors and the state/area in which they were employed was protected.

Phase I: Electronic Survey of State Agency Directors

An electronic survey (e-survey) was developed utilizing the SurveyMonkey.com survey tool. The objectives of the study were identified and the term, "state agency child nutrition professionals" was defined as those individuals who work with local school districts and/or program sponsors in a variety of roles. These roles could include, but not be limited to, technical assistance, audit, Coordinated Review Effort reviews, School Meals Initiative reviews, training, etc. For the purpose of the research the roles of clerical and support staff were not addressed. Specific instructions for completing the survey were given followed by a request for copies of

the organizational chart for the state agency and the job descriptions for all positions in their agency that are filled by CN professionals. Multiple choice questions explored the training and professional development activities of state agency CN professionals. Other questions requested information about the education and experience requirements for entry level and supervisory positions in the state agency. Most multiple choice questions allowed for several answers per question. Open-ended questions permitted text entry for lengthy responses. Demographic information questions concluded the survey. Five academic and practice-oriented foodservice professionals were asked to pilot test the survey. A telephone interview was conducted with each professional to address questions regarding the clarity and appropriateness of the language of the cover letter and survey. In addition, the mechanics of accessing the survey was tested. Revisions were implemented according to the experts' advice.

An introductory pre-notice letter was e-mailed to the director of each state agency that houses CN professionals to ask for their cooperation with the project. Directors from some U.S. territories and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) personnel were included in the potential participant list, as they also direct programs that include CN professionals. This pre-notice e-mail was sent approximately one week prior to beginning the study. It notified potential participants of the study and requested their participation in the online survey. One week later, each director was sent an e-mail requesting submission of materials relevant to the study. This e-mail explained the purpose of the research, use of the data obtained from the research, and the Internet link where they could access the online survey. The e-mailed message emphasized that involvement in the project was voluntary, and participants could choose to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that participation denoted consent. For recipients who did not wish to participate, a second Internet link was provided. When accessed, it

removed the user from any subsequent survey contacts. The directors were asked to complete an online survey and to submit copies of their organizational chart and job descriptions delineating the functions of CN professionals employed in their state agency. A reminder e-mail was sent to all directors who had not responded one week subsequent to sending the initial e-mail with the survey link. This e-mail encouraged directors to return requested materials and to complete the e-survey if they had not already done so.

The data were tabulated electronically utilizing the collection and analysis features of the commercial online survey tool. E-survey results were tabulated, summarized, and reported electronically to the researchers. Number and percent was determined for each question. Additional comments were recorded, and responses to open-ended questions requiring text entry were recorded for review.

Phase II: Job Description Analysis and Theme Identification

Job descriptions and organizational charts submitted by state agency directors were reviewed to identify the job functions performed by CN professionals who work in state agencies. The researchers assembled the submitted job descriptions, and a visual review of all the job descriptions was completed. The researchers performed a contextual analysis to analyze and interpret the data. The preliminary themes that emerged through this process served as identified words/phrases for electronic searches of each job description.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phase I: Electronic Survey of State Agency Directors

Of the 62 electronic surveys (e-surveys) sent, 40 were returned with responses. This 65% response rate is considered relatively high. However, not all questions were completed by all participants.

The survey results are displayed in the tables below. Each table is dedicated to a specific survey item. The tables include both the number of the responses to each question, and the percentage for each question.

Table 1

Job Titles (n = 38)

Job Title	Percent	Number
State Agency Director	94.7	36
Assistant State Agency Director	2.6	1
State Agency Staff	2.6	1

In only two instances did someone other than the state agency director complete the e-survey. Three respondents added the following clarifications to their responses; “Bureau Chief – Community Food and Nutrition Assistance,” “USDA Regional Office,” and “Acting State Director.”

Table 2

Child Nutrition Programs Administered by State Agency (n = 40)

Child Nutrition Programs	Percent^a	Number^b
National School Lunch Program (NSLP) – public	82.5	33
National School Lunch Program (NSLP) - private	77.5	31
School Breakfast Program (SBP)	85.0	34
School Food Service Summer Program (SFSP)	82.5	33
Child and Adult Care Food Program – child	75.0	30
Child and Adult Care Food Program – adult	67.5	27
Residential Child Care Institution – private	80.0	32
Residential Child Care Institution – public	80.0	32
Special Milk Program	82.5	33
Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program	85.0	34
Food Distribution Program	55.0	22

^a Percentages add to more than 100% because each responding state agency administers multiple Child Nutrition Programs

^b Numbers add to more than 40 because each responding state agency administers multiple Child Nutrition Programs

All respondents indicated that they are responsible for directing and managing multiple child nutrition (CN) programs. The NSLP is administered by a majority of the respondents. The SBP is administered by 85% of the state agencies responding to the survey, and only 55% of respondents direct a food distribution program. Other programs administered by state agencies included a variety of grants, the “At Risk Snack and Supper Program,” the “Emergency Food Assistance Program,” and the School Breakfast Program in private schools.

Table 3

Divisions/Branches/Units Supervised by State Agency Director (n = 37)

Number Respondents	Number Divisions Supervised	Percent Respondents
16	11	44.5
1	9	2.8
3	8	8.3
4	7	11.1
4	6	11.1
4	4	11.1
4	3	11.1

All respondents supervise multiple units with a majority overseeing seven or more divisions. However, in some instances, CN professionals may be situated in units providing services to many units, not just those responsible for CN programs.

Table 4

Educational Requirements for the Manager/Leader of Each Division/Branch/Unit (n = 38)

Education Requirements	Number
Bachelor's Degree	
No formal degree requirements	1
Bachelor's degree only	8
Bachelor's degree plus varying number of years experience	22
Bachelor's degree plus 15 hours of specified formal undergraduate coursework	1
Master's Degree	
Master's degree	7
Master's degree plus varying number of years experience	9
Master's degree plus certification by state as a State or SN Director	1
Master's degree plus 6 hours of specified formal undergraduate coursework	1
Master's degree plus 6 hours graduate credit	1
Registered Dietitian Credential	
Registered Dietitian credential	3
Registered Dietitian credential plus 5 years experience	1

With one exception, all positions of leadership in state agencies performed by CN professionals require possession of at least a Bachelor's degree and for many, a Master's degree. A few required additional educational requirements, such as completion of specific coursework or certification.

Table 5

Experience Requirements for the Manager/Leader of Each Division/Branch/Unit (n = 38)

Experience Requirements	Number
Bachelor's Degree	
No experience specified	7
One year of experience	1
Three years of experience	1
Four years of experience	1
Five years of experience	13
Six years of experience	1
Seven years of experience	1
Master's Degree	
No experience specified	7
One year of experience	1
Four years of experience	1
Five years of experience	3
Seven years of experience	1
Ten years of experience	2
Twelve years of experience	1
Registered Dietitian Credential	
No experience specified	3
Five years experience	1

Two respondents stated that experience was required, but no specific quantity of time was mandated. An additional two respondents noted that possession of specific knowledge, skills, and abilities was used as a guide for hiring or promotion rather than a specified number of years experience. In some instances, additional education could be substituted for a specified amount of experience, and additional years of experience could substitute for required education.

Table 6

Entry-Level Education and Experience Requirements for the Professional Positions in Each Division/Branch/Unit (n = 39)

Entry Level Education/Experience Requirements for Child Nutrition Professionals^a	Number^b
No mandated education/experience requirements	2
Associate's Degree	1
Associate's degree with 1 years experience in Public Administration, Food and Nutrition, Dietetics, Business Administration, Accounting; 1 year of experience may substitute for 1 year of education	1
Bachelor's degree	10
Bachelor's degree plus 1-5 years experience in related field	10
Master's degree	8
Master's degree plus 3-8 years experience	3
Registered Dietitian credential preferred	2
Registered Dietitian credential	5
Registered Dietitian credential plus 1-4 years experience	2

^a Clerical and support staff positions are not included

^b Numbers add to more than 39 because of multiple answers to question

This survey question included a variety of responses. However, many responses contained the same and/or overlapping information. Most state agencies mandate specific education/experience requirements for CN professional positions. However, one respondent replied that entry level positions required a Bachelor's degree and a "service orientation." In many instances, the agency has alternative options for substituting experience for required education or education for required experience. In some instances, other considerations for substitution were graduate course work as a substitute for up to two years experience and a

specific degree that would be accepted in lieu of the Registered Dietitian (RD) credential. In general, the CN program positions available in state agencies require education beyond the secondary level, varying degrees of experience, and in some cases, special credentialing.

Table 7

First Year Training Provided for New Hires (n = 39)

Training During First Year of Employment^a	Number^b
On-the job, hands-on training	14
Mentoring	10
USDA Regional Office, training, online guidance	6
Independent learning/reading	6
Orientation	6
Professional conferences	6
Buddy system	5
National Food Service Management Institute	4
Webinars	2
One-on-one training	2
Internal core topic training	2
Cross training	2
Observation	2
Program manager training	1
Individual training for Commodity Distribution Program	1
Department group classes	1
Agency training for program sponsors	1
Staff meetings	1
Conference calls	1
On-line training	1
Viewing videos	1

^a Clerical and support staff positions are not included

^b Numbers add to more than 39 because of multiple answers to question

Three of the top four training methods cited by respondents were informal, person-to-person training methods (on-the-job, mentoring, independent learning/reading). In many instances, more formal, outside training was provided by the USDA, National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI), and training at professional conferences. Generally, a wide variety of methods were used to provide training to CN professionals employed in state agencies.

Table 8

First Year Training Topics

First Year Training Topics

Healthy Cuisine for Kids

How to conduct interviews, pre-site visits, technical assistance, and concluding workshops

ServSafe

Child nutrition manager certification program parts 1 and 2

Child nutrition director certification program

Serving it Safe

Nutrition

SMI reviews

Menu planning

Food Safety

Program requirements

State policies and procedures

Hiring personnel

Table 8 continues

(Table 8 continued)

First Year Training Topics

First Year Training Topics

Overview of Child Nutrition and Food Distribution Programs

Internet access, software utilization

Basic management principles

Computer system security

Diversity

Sexual harassment

Writing SMART goals

How to conduct effective, successful training sessions

Conducting technical assistance reviews

Conducting CRE or SMI reviews

Record keeping

Reporting requirements

Relationship building with School Food Authority personnel

Communicating with school administrators

Legal responsibilities associated with the Child Nutrition Consultant's role

Decision making

Problem solving

Priority management

Public laws, regulations

Federal and state regulations

Policies and procedures concerning child nutrition jobs

The training topics provided to CN professionals were varied. The assortment addressed both CN program needs and training to improve performance within the agency.

Table 9

First Year Training Methods (n = 39)

Training Methods	Percent^a	Number^b
On-the-job training	100.0	39
Independent learning	97.4	38
Individual counseling	97.4	38
Individual review of policy/procedure manuals, training resources, etc.	89.7	35
Mentoring	84.6	33
Group lecture	41.0	16
Webinars	30.8	12
Web-based modules	25.6	10
Audio conferences	25.6	10
Other	25.6	10
Video conferences	23.1	9
Podcasts	7.7	3

^a Percentages add to more than 39 because of multiple answers to the question

^b Numbers add to more than 39 because of multiple answers to the question

Other methods cited by respondents included USDA training, cross training, attending state, regional, national conferences or training sessions, video training, state training resources on-line, training from other state agencies, staff development meetings, team meetings, accompanying another CN professional, School Nutrition Association, and NFSMI training resources obtained by attending a workshops or by accessing online resources available on the

NFSMI Web site. Five training methods (individual counseling, on-the-job training, independent learning, mentoring, and individual review of policy and procedure manuals, training resources, etc.) were used by 85% or more of the respondents. Web training resources are used by 10-12% of the respondents. The pervasive use of traditional methods reflects considerations such as convenience; availability of time, funds, materials, and travel; level and availability of technology; resistance to change; and knowledge of available resources.

Table 10

First Year Training Providers (n = 40)

Source of First Year Training	Percent^a	Number^b
Staff from unit in which trainee is housed	95.0	38
USDA/FNS	55.0	22
National Food Service Management Institute (NFSMI)	47.5	19
State agency staff from other departments	45.0	18
Professional associations such as the School Nutrition Association, American Dietetic Association, etc.	10.0	4
Outside consultants	10.0	4

^a Percentages add to more than 100% because of multiple answers to the question

^b Numbers add to more than 40 because of multiple answers to the question

Based on these results, staff from the unit in which the trainee is housed and staff from other departments in the state agency conduct most of the training for the newly hired CN professionals. More than half utilize the resources provided by USDA/FNS, and many take advantage of the resources provided by NFSMI and other professional organizations.

Table 11

Professional Development/Continuing Education Opportunities Following First Year of Employment (n = 35)

Professional Development/Continuing Education Opportunities	Number^a
School Nutrition Association	15
Local, state, regional, national conferences and/or workshops	11
USDA/FNS meetings, conferences (Healthier US Challenge, CRE, SMI)	8
American Dietetic Association	8
Technology training (Lotus Note, NUTRIkids, People Soft, Office Suite, writing contracts, SmartBoard, computer training, webinars, teleconferences, software such as Excel, Word, Outlook)	7
Formal education (university courses, degree completion, specialty certification, train-the-trainer for sanitation, on-line classes, mini-courses on-line)	6
National Food Service Management Institute	5
Individual/self learning (readings, journals)	3
Private sector training/consultants	2
On-the-job training (lunch hour forums, monthly in-house meetings related to Child Nutrition Programs)	2
State Department of Education training (Human Resources, certified public manager certification)	1
Membership in professional organizations	1

^a Numbers add to more than 35 because of multiple answers to question

Attendance at professional association meetings and associated continuing education activities plays the largest role in the first year professional development opportunities for CN professionals working in state agencies. Professional development opportunities include agency sponsored technology training.

Table 12

Professional Development/Continuing Education Topics in the First Year of Employment

Professional Development/Continuing Education Topics

Travel reimbursement
Management
Supervision
Problem solving
Diversity
Civil rights
Financial management
National and state regulations
Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point
Coordinated Review Effort
School Meals Initiative
Food buying/menu planning
Diabetes
Special dietary needs for children
Service excellence
Valuing diversity
A respectful workplace
Offer versus Serve
Free/reduced price meal eligibility
Emerging trends in Child Nutrition Programs
Healthy Edge online
National Food Service Management Institute Procurement online

Topics of continuing education activities for CN professionals are wide-ranging, addressing specific work issues or department focused needs.

Table 13

Professional Development/Continuing Education Methods (n=40)

Methods of Professional Development/Continuing Education	Percent^a	Number^b
USDA/FNS training	92.5	37
Professional organization conferences	87.5	35
Seminars/workshops	67.5	35
Webinars	65.0	26
Web-based modules	42.5	17
Video conferences	35.0	14
Audio conferences	30.0	12
Podcasts	7.5	3

^a Percentages add to more than 100% because of multiple answers to question

^b Numbers add to more than 40 because of multiple answers to questions

The USDA and professional organization conferences play a dominant role in how professional development opportunities are provided to CN professionals working in state agencies. Web-based technology is being used increasingly as a method of providing continuing education to professionals on an individual or group basis.

Table 14

Professional Development/Continuing Education Providers (n = 40)

Provider of Professional Development/Continuing Education	Percent^a	Number^b
USDA/FNS	90.0	36
State agency staff	87.5	35
Professional organizations such as School Nutrition Association, American Dietetic Association, etc.	72.5	29
National Food Service Management Institute	70.0	28
Outside consultants	42.5	17

^a Percentages add to more than 100% because of multiple answers to question

^b Numbers add to more than 40 because of multiple answers to questions

Participants indicated that the largest single provider of professional development opportunities is the USDA. State agency staff, professional organizations, and the NFSMI all are frequently used sources of continuing education. Outside consultants are another source of continuing education, but are used less frequently than the other sources identified.

Table 15

Education and Experience of Current Staff (n = 40)

Education/Experience Background	Percent^a	Number^b
Undergraduate degree in nutrition	92.5	37
Graduate degree in nutrition	80.0	32
Registered Dietitian (RD) credential	80.0	32
Experience as a teacher	65.0	26
Experience in others areas of state	62.5	25
Undergraduate degree in business	62.5	25
Experience in foodservice management	62.5	25
Experience as school nutrition director	60.0	24
Experience with local/state health department(s)	55.0	22
Graduate degree in business	47.5	19
Experience in adult education	45.0	18
Undergraduate degree in foodservice management	42.5	17
School Nutrition Specialist (SNS)	42.5	17
Experience on a school nutrition district-level management team	42.5	17
Experience in Cooperative Extension	37.5	15
Experience working at a CNP state agency in another state	27.5	11
Experience as a sponsoring organization monitor (CACFP)	25.0	10
Graduate degree in foodservice management	20.0	8
Experience as a sponsoring organization director (CACFP)	15.0	6
American Culinary Federation certification	10.0	4

^a Percentages add to more than 100% because of multiple answers to question

^b Numbers add to more than 40 because of multiple answers to question

The single most common experience held by CN professionals working in state agencies is an undergraduate degree in nutrition. Other areas of education/experience noted by respondents included the following: experience as school business manager, cafeteria manager, state child care licensing agency, USDA headquarters experience, experience in the commercial sector, and undergraduate degree in home economics.

Table 16

Current Position/Tenure as State Agency Director (n = 40)

Length Tenure in Position	Percent	Number
Less than 1 year	7.5	3
1 - 5 years	30.0	12
6 - 10 years	30.0	12
11 - 15 years	17.5	7
16 - 20 years	5.0	2
More than 20 years	10.0	4

The majority (60%) of state agency directors have been in their current position one to ten years. Only three are new to their position (less than one year). In general, state agency directors are experienced and provide expertise fostered by tenure in their job.

Table 17

Education Level of Respondents (n = 40)

Highest Level of Education of Respondents	Percent	Number
High School or GED	0	0
Associate's degree	0	0
Bachelor's degree	7.5	3
Some graduate credits	17.5	7
Master's degree	45.0	18
Graduate hours beyond Master's degree	17.5	7
Doctoral degree	12.5	5

The majority of state agency directors (92.5%) have completed graduate level course work or graduate degrees. In some instances, a graduate degree is a requirement of the job. However, in many instances, a graduate degree is not required to hold the position. Three respondents reported that in addition to university degrees, they are Registered Dietitians; two were licensed or certified in their state; one held Fellow of the American Dietetic Association certification; and one had completed twenty post-graduate hours of college credit in Information Technology.

Table 18

USDA Regions of Respondents (n = 40)

USDA Region	Percent	Number
Western – AK, AZ, CA, GU, HI, ID, NV, OR, WA	17.5	7
Mountain Plains – CO, IA, KS, MO, MT, ND, NE, SD, UT, WY	20.0	8
Midwest – IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI	7.5	3
Northeast – CT, MA, ME, NH, NY, RI, VT	7.5	3
Mid-Atlantic – DC, DE, MD, NJ, PA, PR, VA, VI, WV	10	4
Southeast – AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN	27.5	11
Southwest – AR, LA, NM, OK, TX	10.0	4

Participants from all seven USDA regions responded to the survey. The Southeast and Mountain Plains regions together accounted for 47.5% of respondents. Both the Midwest and the Northeast region had a response rate of 7.5%.

Phase II: Identification of Themes in State Agency Job Descriptions

Nineteen of the 50 state directors submitted job descriptions for the CN professional positions in their state agency (38%). Table 19 depicts the USDA regions in which the states are located that depicted job descriptions and organizational charts.

Table 19

USDA Regions of States Submitting Job Descriptions and Organizational Charts (n = 19)

USDA Region	Number	Percent
Western	2	10.5
Mountain Plains	5	26.3
Midwest	3	15.8
Northeast	2	10.5
Mid-Atlantic	2	10.5
Southeast	4	21.1
Southwest	1	5.3

The most heavily represented USDA region was the Mountain Plains area, with five states (26.3%) submitting job descriptions and organizational charts. The lowest response was the Southwest region, with one state (5.3 %) submitting job related documents.

In Phase II of the project, all job descriptions and organizational charts were reviewed to identify the job functions performed by CN professionals who work in state agencies. The researchers assembled the submitted job descriptions, and a visual review of all the job descriptions was completed. The researchers performed a contextual analysis to analyze and interpret the data. Commonalities among the activities performed by CN personnel in the administration and oversight of the CN programs were noted. Twelve preliminary themes were identified:

Preliminary Theme Identification

Accountability: State agency CN personnel analyze and interpret complex federal, state, and local regulations and policies, and they develop written guidance for CN personnel to ensure program compliance.

Administration: State agency CN professionals are responsible for directing and supervising the programs for which they are responsible. Their duties encompass planning, consulting, and advisory functions.

General Management: State-level CN professionals oversee all aspects of the CN programs within the state. They direct and supervise activities essential to the successful operation. They must possess a comprehensive knowledge of operations management.

Nutrition and Menu Management: CN professionals ensure that meals served in CN programs meet nutritional standards and meal pattern regulations, meet requirements of special need students, and ensure that nutritional integrity is maintained through implementation of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

Education/Training: The CN professionals in state agencies apply current educational principles to provide program personnel with orientation, new employee training, continuing education, and specialized training identified by audits and reviews.

Technical Assistance: CN professionals utilize results of monitoring, audits, and operational reviews to determine clients' need for assistance. They plan, develop, and deliver technical assistance on program management and other pertinent topics. They adapt training to provide assistance on an individualized and an as-needed basis.

Financial Management and Recordkeeping: The CN professionals oversee the organization and management of the business functions of the programs they supervise to maintain an efficient

and effective organization. They oversee and monitor CN programs to ensure they operate within all fiscal regulations and policies.

Marketing and Communication: CN professionals working in state agencies promote the value of CN programs to allied agencies, other departments, professional organizations, customers, administrators, faculty, parents and family members, the community, and other stakeholders. They initiate outreach activities to expand the effectiveness and scope of CN programs using a variety of communication techniques.

Human Resource Management: CN professionals interpret and communicate to CN personnel human resource regulations, policies and procedures, and provide guidance as needed in ensuring compliance. They apply conflict resolution, negotiation, and problem-solving techniques and training to improve their job skills and productivity.

Technology and Information: The CN professionals utilize available resources to ensure that information technology systems meet the operational needs of CN programs. They understand federal, state, and local procedures for the selection, purchase, and disposal of hardware and/or software systems. They develop procedures for care and maintenance, and they provide training in the use of available technology. They research and analyze new technology to determine its potential utility in CN programs.

Research: CN professionals research educational policies, issues, reforms, organizations, and topics relevant to improved CN programs. They plan management studies, and utilize available technology for data collection, analysis, and reporting. They collaborate with others to expand knowledge and improve service to clients.

Professional Excellence: The CN professionals working in state agencies model professional behavior; deal with others in a professional and ethical manner; and support the vision, mission,

and interests of CN programs and the state agency. They network, cooperate, and collaborate to further the aims of the program and agency.

Significant Theme Identification

The 12 preliminary themes served as identifying words/phrases for electronic searches of each job description. The researchers entered the tasks delineated in each job description in electronic files. In this manner, individual tasks were clustered under a particular word/phrase. The activity clusters were examined for patterns, commonalities, and differences. Significant themes were identified. The final themes incorporated and expanded the preliminary topics and detailed and identified the subject matter more definitively.

Meetings: Coordinates, participates, and facilitates meetings and meeting procedures.

Goals-Objectives: Assists and establishes goals; facilitates and evaluates attainment.

Improvement: Researches, assesses, develops, recommends, counsels, guides, and evaluates system changes to increase and enhance effectiveness and efficiency.

Conflict Resolution-Problem Solving: Assists, advises, mediates, investigates, and resolves grievances/complaints.

Professional Excellence-Continuing Education: Participates in the following: graduate level education; continuing education and professional courses; workshops; professional and educational conferences; and work related activities to promote and enhance professional knowledge and expertise.

Administration: Directs CN programs and job-related groups/activities to ensure effective service to clients.

Operations: Oversees the processes and procedures of CN programs and provides expert guidance in system functions.

Agreements: Supervises, advises, and assists with development, preparation, and implementation of participation agreements for CN programs.

Legislative Activities: Interprets, analyzes, develops, and reviews legislation; represents department and provides testimony at legislative hearings. Advocates for legislation favorable/helpful to CN programs.

Representation-Liaison: Functions as agent and liaison with individuals, groups, and government agencies to present and clarify department/bureau philosophy and procedures.

Compliance: Provides education, guidance, and oversight to ensure that CN programs act in accordance with all regulations, policies, procedures, and guidelines required by federal, state, and local governments.

Planning: Develops, implements, and evaluates strategies to establish, maintain, and interpret unit's mission, goals, and objectives through strategic planning.

Research: Reviews, interprets, analyzes, evaluates, adapts, and conducts investigations of issues affecting CNP operations and resources.

Outreach: Develops, implements, and leads activities to expand participation in CN programs.

Policies/Procedures: Identifies issues and formulates, evaluates, and recommends methods, and set of principles for CN program operations.

Reports/Correspondence: Prepares, reviews, acts on, and submits required correspondence and technical program information to supervisors, programs, government agencies, organizations, and the public.

Food Distribution-Commodities: Administers the food distribution program and manages all activities related to food supply and donated commodities.

Nutrition: Monitors, advises, and educates clients to ensure they meet the nutrition requirements and regulations of the CN programs they oversee.

Coordination: Synchronizes program elements, program related activities, staff, other individuals, and organizations to ensure organized operations and efficient consumer services.

Monitoring: Regularly scrutinizes CN program administration, operations, and personnel actions to improve performance and ensure compliance with all federal, state, and local regulations.

Financial/Recordkeeping: Monitors, reviews, analyzes, evaluates, and supervises the preparation of program and financial reports to meet regulatory and management requirements. Provides expert evaluation of fiscal practices and recommendations for improved business practices.

Technical Assistance: Provides expertise, training, guidance, consultation, and assistance to CNPs, clients, and staff.

Technology: Secures and utilizes appropriate technology. Coordinates computer processing and management information system.

Grants: Prepares and oversees grant-related activities and ensures compliance with grant priorities.

Supervision: Provides leadership, direction, and support to CN programs and department/bureau operations.

Review/Evaluation: Critically examines and assesses CN programs for adherence to regulations, program goal attainment, nutritional integrity, and program improvement.

Regulations: Interprets, analyzes, and ensures CN programs comply with federal, state, and local regulations.

Management: Skillfully organizes, administers, and supervises all program and unit resources to provide excellent client services.

Public Relations/Communication: Establishes, maintains, and encourages communication and favorable relationships among CN programs and clients, the public, government entities, advocacy groups, and professional organizations to further the goals of and increase participation in CN programs.

Training: Develops, directs, coordinates, and evaluates all training activities and resources within the department/bureau.

Table 20 provides the usage of items relating to each significant theme in the submitted job descriptions.

Table 20

Significant Themes Identified from State Agency Job Descriptions

Significant Themes	Instances Items Used in Job Descriptions
Training	240
Public Relations/Communication	145
Management	139
Regulations	134
Review/Evaluation	115
Supervision	110
Grants	97
Technology	92
Technical Assistance	86
Financial/Recordkeeping	85
Monitoring	77
Coordination	52

Table 20 continues

(Table 20 continued)

Significant Themes Identified from State Agency Job Descriptions

Significant Themes	Instances Items Used in Job Descriptions
Nutrition	49
Food Distribution/Commodities	48
Reports/Correspondence	44
Policies/Procedures	40
Outreach	22
Research	22
Planning	22
Compliance	21
Representation/Liaison	20
Legislative Activities	17
Agreements	17
Operations	17
Administration	15
Professional Excellence/Continuing Education	15
Conflict Resolution/Problem Solving	13
Program Improvement	12
Goals/Objectives	10
Meetings	9

The prevalence of job description items comprising each significant theme provides insight into the responsibilities and skills required of CN professionals employed in state agencies. The most dominant themes identified (cited more than 100 times within job descriptions) include “Training,” “Public Relations/Communication,” “Management,” “Regulations,” “Review-Evaluation,” and “Supervision.” Although each theme stands alone, none are completely independent. All overlap and have duplications and similarities of tasks.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Child nutrition (CN) professionals working in state agencies perform a wide variety of functions. These professionals possess a comprehensive knowledge of CN systems and operations, as well as experience in CN programs or related fields. Responses from state agency directors who completed the survey indicated that a majority remain in their current positions for extended periods of time, thus, little turnover occurs. This stability provides a repository of experience and knowledge available to CN professionals in the state agency. Training to adjust for changes in leadership is an issue that will need to be addressed.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the results of the electronic survey, the responses to open-ended questions, and the information gleaned from job descriptions and organization charts submitted by state directors responding to the electronic survey:

- CN professionals employed by the state agency possess at least a Bachelor's degree;
- CN professionals possess varying amounts of experience in related activities;
- CN professionals holding a managerial position in the state agency possess a graduate degree, specialized professional credential, increased years of experience or a combination of these requirements;
- CN professionals in state agencies complete continuing education requirements on an annual basis;
- First year training for CN professionals is on-the-job and is enhanced with mentoring;
- Training methods during the first year of employment for CN professionals are individual learning techniques;

- Major sources of first year training for CN professionals are within the home unit and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA);
- Major sources of professional development opportunities for CN professionals after the first year of employment are the School Nutrition Association, professional association conferences/workshops, USDA, and the American Dietetic Association;
- Professional development for CN professionals is provided by USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) training, professional organization conferences, seminars and workshops, and Webinars;
- Major providers of professional development for CN professionals are USDA, FNS, state agency staff, and professional organizations;
- CN professionals come to their state agency positions with a wide variety of prior work experience;
- Most state agency directors have held their current position from one to ten years;
- A majority of state agency directors have completed graduate level formal education; and
- Each state maintains an individual training system.

Recommendations

The results from this study can be used to identify job functions, training needs, preferred methods of training, and skills necessary for CN professionals to conduct reviews and provide technical assistance. State agency staff members perform a pivotal role in ensuring that CN programs comply with government regulations, fulfill the needs of their clients/customers, and ultimately, positively influence the services provided to those being served. Identification of common functions, competencies, and skills needed by CN personnel working in state agencies

contributes to building a strong training infrastructure consistent from state to state. It is critical to have a common system of training, as it offers a method to transmit expectations for excellent performance and strengthens accountability. Strong accountability provides the vital link between state agencies expectations and local performance throughout the nation. Thus, all children can be assured of receiving reliably excellent service no matter the location. The information gained from this small sample of state agency directors and themes identified from review of job descriptions may be used to form the foundation for a large electronic survey to be administered to a nationwide cohort of CN professionals.

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