

Why GAO Did This Study

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that many Americans' diets lack adequate sources of good nutrition and that this contributes to costly chronic health conditions. USDA funds and administers a variety of nutrition education efforts, which aim to help educate Americans on nutrition and improve their dietary choices. GAO was asked to review these efforts.

This report examines the extent to which USDA (1) has information on participation, expenditures, and effectiveness for its nutrition education programs; and (2) coordinates its nutrition education efforts and leverages internal nutrition expertise for these efforts. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, guidance, and GAO's prior work on nutrition education and leading practices for collaboration; analyzed USDA data on nutrition education participation in fiscal year 2018 and expenditures in fiscal year 2017, the most recent year with complete data available; and reviewed program evaluations and available outcome data for fiscal year 2018. GAO also interviewed USDA officials and representatives of relevant organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to USDA, including that USDA improve how it gathers information on SNAP-Ed effectiveness, develop a formal mechanism for coordinating nutrition education across the department, and take steps to fully leverage the department's nutrition expertise for its nutrition education efforts. USDA generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-19-572](#). For more information, contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

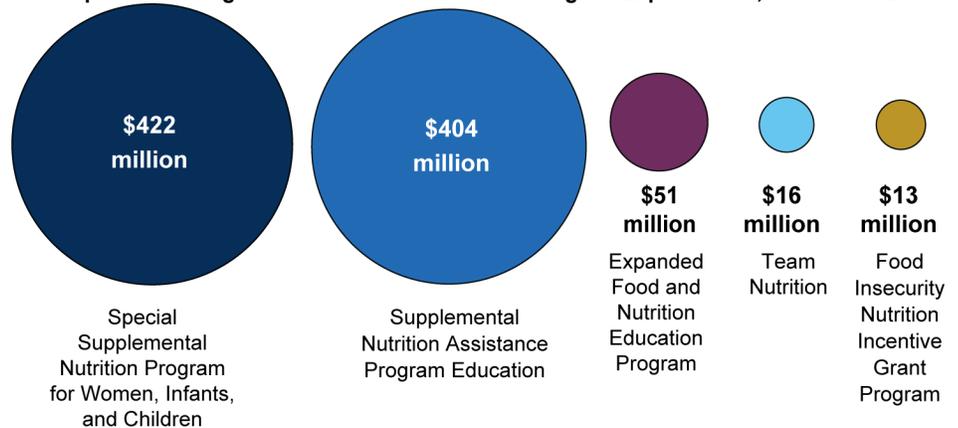
NUTRITION EDUCATION

USDA Actions Needed to Assess Effectiveness, Coordinate Programs, and Leverage Expertise

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers five key programs that provide nutrition education and has information on participation, expenditures, and effectiveness for most of these programs. USDA tracks the number of participants in direct education, such as classes and counseling, as well as other measures of program reach. For example, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed), one of USDA's largest nutrition education programs, served 3.8 million participants through direct education in fiscal year 2018. USDA also collects nationwide expenditure data for all of its nutrition education programs, which totaled nearly \$907 million in fiscal year 2017—the most recent year with complete data available. In addition, USDA collects some information on the effectiveness of most of its nutrition education programs; yet information USDA collects from states on SNAP-Ed effectiveness cannot be easily aggregated or reviewed. States provide this information in narrative reports, which hinders USDA's ability to assess the effectiveness of interventions used across the country and determine whether SNAP-Ed is achieving its goals.

U.S. Department of Agriculture Nutrition Education Program Expenditures, Fiscal Year 2017



GAO analysis of U.S. Department of Agriculture expenditure data. | GAO-19-572

USDA does not have a formal coordination mechanism for its nutrition education efforts and does not fully leverage the department's nutrition expertise. According to USDA officials, coordinating nutrition education efforts has not been a priority in recent years, and the department does not have a dedicated individual or entity with leadership responsibility for nutrition education. This has resulted in limited coordination across USDA's nutrition education programs, including programs with similar target populations. GAO previously reported that effective coordination can help reduce overlap and duplication. In its absence, USDA's nutrition education programs are missing opportunities to share information and avoid duplicating efforts. Further, some USDA nutrition experts are not located in agencies or offices overseeing the nutrition education programs, and possibly because of this, program staff consult these experts on a limited basis, if at all. Failing to leverage its internal expertise hinders USDA's development of nutrition education materials that are informed by the latest nutrition guidance and research and may reduce the effectiveness of these efforts.