

UNDERSTANDING NUTRITION: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT – THE FEDERAL SYSTEM

This section briefly describes the federal governmental agencies, departments, and programs related to nutrition and food assistance.

The Federal Government

The federal government plays a central role in funding, regulating, and developing public policy for most public nutrition and food assistance programs. The federal government also conducts and disseminates research, in addition to developing and implementing national education campaigns. These efforts are directed primarily through the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), with more limited responsibilities assumed by other federal agencies. (See Figures on pages 5 and 9.)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

The [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA) develops and implements national policy for agriculture, food assistance programs, nutrition standards and guidelines, food safety, natural resources, and rural development. It allocates federal funds for a variety of food assistance and distribution programs to state, county, city, and tribal governments, as well as to private organizations. Within the USDA, four divisions are primarily responsible for food and nutrition policy and programs: Food and Nutrition Service, the Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, the Economic Research Service, and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

Food and Nutrition Service

[Food and Nutrition Service](#) (FNS) is based in the USDA Office of Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. FNS administers 15 food assistance programs, serving an estimated one in four Americans each year.

Since 2000, federal spending on food assistance programs has increased each year.¹ In 2010, the USDA spent \$94.8 billion – over two-thirds of its budget – on food assistance programs.²

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Programs include:

- [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#) is the largest food assistance program in the country and represents the largest allocation of federal funding for food and nutrition assistance.³ It is designed to expand if the economy declines. Formerly the Food Stamp Program, SNAP helps low-income Americans^a purchase food and offers states the option of sharing costs to provide nutrition education to promote healthy eating. States may conduct outreach activities to increase participation in the program. (Go to www.ccrwf.org to access the Nutrition Primer module on California's SNAP program, known as CalFresh.)
- [SNAP Education \(SNAP-Ed\)](#) is a partnership between the federal government and state and local agencies to deliver nutrition education to individuals certified or potentially eligible for SNAP because their incomes fall below 130 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines. Following WIC, it is the second largest source of funds for nutrition education. SNAP-Ed will be gradually replaced by the Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Grant Program (NEOP), which was developed through a provision in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the program.
- [Child Nutrition Programs](#) provide cash reimbursements for USDA-supported meals served to eligible low-income children and youth through the [National School Lunch Program \(NSLP\)](#), [School Breakfast Program \(SBP\)](#), [Summer Food Service Program \(SFSP\)](#) and [Seamless Summer Food Option \(SSFO\)](#), [Special Milk Program \(SMP\)](#), and [Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#). The [Child and Adult Care Food Program \(CACFP\)](#) provides meals and snacks to children in eligible child care centers, day care homes and after-school programs, and to adults in nonresidential adult day care centers. The program also provides meals to children in emergency shelters. The [Team Nutrition](#) initiative promotes nutrition education through these programs by providing training and technical assistance to schools, food service staff and caregivers. (Go to www.ccrwf.org to access the Nutrition Primer modules on child nutrition programs.)

For a history of U.S. food assistance programs, go to the [USDA or Food Research and Action Center websites](#).

Child Nutrition Reauthorization 2010

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 took steps to increase access to child nutrition programs by expanding eligibility, improving nutritional quality of meals, and simplifying paperwork and the certification process.

^a As of October 1, 2011, eligibility requirements include a gross monthly income below 130% of the federal poverty guidelines (e.g., \$2,389 for a family of four).

- The [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children \(WIC\)](#) is a discretionary program that provides vouchers for specific healthy foods (including fresh fruits and vegetables), nutrition education, and breastfeeding support to eligible low-income pregnant and postpartum women, as well as children under five years of age who are at nutritional risk. The program also screens and refers WIC families to other safety net programs, such as health care and food assistance. The WIC food prescription now includes fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, soy foods, and low-fat dairy products and incentivizes breastfeeding among new mothers. The [Farmers' Market Nutrition Program](#) supplements WIC benefits by providing WIC participants with vouchers to purchase locally grown produce. This benefit is also available to eligible low-income seniors through the [Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program](#). (Go to www.ccrwf.org to access the Nutrition Primer module on WIC.)
- [Food Distribution Programs](#) work with the [Agricultural Marketing Service](#) and [Farm Service Agency](#) to purchase food commodities for distribution through several programs. These programs include [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#), the [Commodity Supplemental Food Program](#), the [Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations](#), and the [Food Distribution Disaster Assistance](#). Commodity foods are provided to seniors through the Administration on Aging's [Nutrition Services Incentive Program](#).

In addition, the food distribution programs distribute commodities through collaborations with some of the federal meal programs. These efforts include:

- Food distribution through Child Nutrition Programs, such as the National School Lunch Program and the [Department of Defense Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#).
- Authorization of [Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(D-SNAP\)](#) benefits for individuals in areas struck by disaster, in addition to food supplied to relief organization feeding sites and shelters.

Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP)

Also based in the Office of Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services, the [Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion](#) (CNPP) uses scientific research to develop and promote dietary guidance and resources for consumers. CNPP – in conjunction with Department of Health and Human Services – publishes the [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#), in addition to other resources to educate consumers about food and nutrition. [ChooseMyPlate.gov](#), the 2010 revision of the *Food Pyramid*, is a food guidance system produced by CNPP to help consumers understand the types and amounts of food essential to a healthy diet.

National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA)

Based in the Office of Research, Education and Economics, the [National Institute of Food and Agriculture](#) (NIFA) provides funding for research, education and extension programs of land grant universities. Formerly the *Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service (CSREES)*, the Institute supports state and local efforts related to agriculture, food and nutrition, community and economic development, and other areas relevant to individual and community well-being.

Key NIFA efforts include nutrition education targeting low-income Americans through the [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program \(EFNEP\)](#) and, in partnership with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, support for SNAP-Ed through its state and local agencies.

Economic Research Service (ERS)

Also based within the Office of Research, Education and Economics, the [Economic Research Service](#) (ERS) is USDA's main source of economic information and research on economic and policy issues related to agriculture, food, natural resources, and rural development. ERS data on nutrition and agriculture are used to identify trends and to inform policy- and market-related decisions.

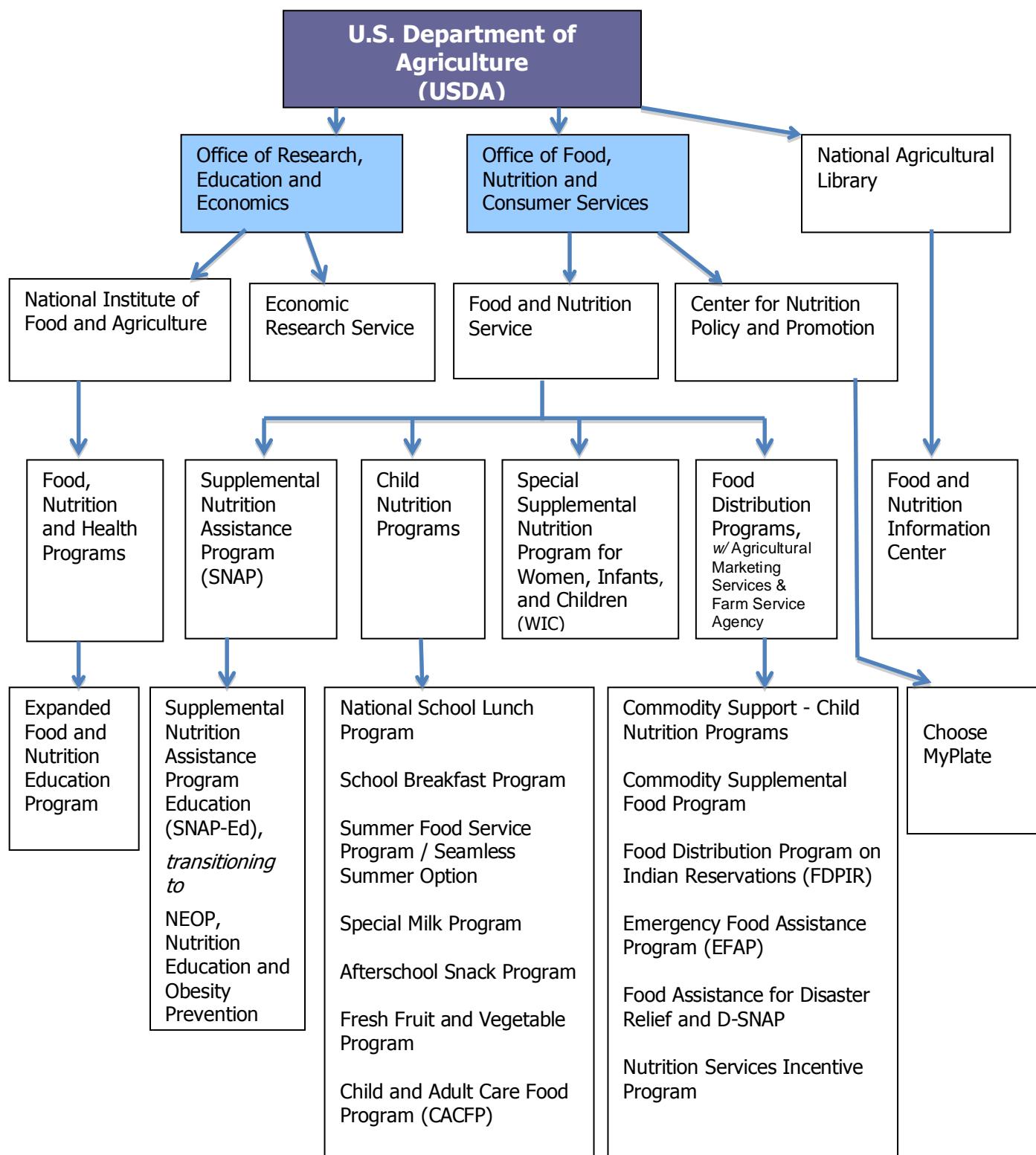
Other USDA Centers

Two additional centers at USDA include:

The [Food and Nutrition Information Center](#) serves as a clearinghouse for nutrition-related information and resources for both the professional community and consumers. It is based in USDA's National Agricultural Library. Special projects run by the Center include the [Nutrition.gov Website](#) for consumers and the [SNAP-Ed Connection](#), [Healthy Meals Resource System](#), and [WIC Works Resource System](#) for health professionals.

The [National Food Service Management Institute](#), permanently authorized by Congress in 1994 and based at the University of Mississippi, offers education, research, and other resources for child nutrition and child care professionals across the country.

FIGURE 1:
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE: KEY NUTRITION OFFICES AND PROGRAMS



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (DHHS)

[Department of Health and Human Services](#) (DHHS) manages a broad portfolio of offices and programs focused on protecting the health of Americans. Its efforts include research and programs focused on food and nutrition, physical activity, food safety, and obesity prevention through various offices. These offices include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Administration on Aging (AoA), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) is home to the [National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion \(NCCDPHP\)](#), which develops recommendations and interventions directed at preventing and controlling chronic diseases. CDC provides guidelines and interventions related to nutrition, obesity prevention, and physical activity. The agency also administers chronic disease categorical programs, the Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant, and several national surveys.

In partnership with states, CDC administers the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2010, CDC administers [Communities Putting Prevention to Work \(CPPW\)](#). Through the Affordable Care Act, CDC administers the [Community Transformation Grants](#).

NCCDPHP houses:

- The [Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity](#), which conducts epidemiological and behavioral research, surveillance, training, health promotion, and social marketing aimed at preventing chronic disease. This division awards obesity-prevention grants to states and provides federal leadership for the National Fruit and Vegetable Alliance, a public/private partnership.
- The [Division of Adolescent and School Health](#) focuses on the health of youth, providing health research and resources to improve the health of students and to foster a healthy school environment.

CDC's [National Center for Health Statistics](#) helps inform preventive efforts by collecting data, primarily through the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES). The surveys are designed to obtain nationally representative information on the health and nutritional status of the U.S. population through interviews and direct physical examinations and are administered on an ongoing basis.

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

The [National Institutes of Health](#) (NIH) is the steward of medical and behavioral research in the United States. It is the largest source of funding for medical research in the world. NIH Institutes with key roles related to nutrition and chronic disease prevention include:

- The [National Cancer Institute](#) is the principal federal agency responsible for cancer-related research and training. These efforts include intra- and extra-mural research related to the relationship between nutrition, physical activity, obesity, and cancer.
- The [National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute](#) coordinates research and training related to cardiovascular, lung and blood diseases. Its initiatives include research and education focused on obesity and its association with heart disease.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

Through its [Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition](#), the [Food and Drug Administration](#) (FDA) monitors food safety, food ingredients and labeling, as well as food industry post-market compliance. The FDA does not regulate meat, poultry or eggs, which is managed by the USDA's food safety division. The FDA will administer new provisions for menu labeling that were authorized under the Affordable Care Act of 2010.

Administration on Aging (AoA)

The [Administration on Aging](#) receives commodity foods from the USDA and administers the Older Americans Act Nutrition Programs, which support congregate and home-delivered meal programs.

Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health

The [Office of the Assistant Secretary of Health](#) oversees 14 core public health areas.

Among these offices are:

- The [Office of the Surgeon General](#) provides policy analysis and advice to the U.S. President and the Secretary of Health and Human Services on major national public health issues, including nutrition, physical activity, and obesity.
 - The Surgeon General serves as chairperson of the [National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council](#), providing recommendations to the President and Congress on health issues and policies impacting public health. The Council is comprised of cabinet members and leaders of federal agencies and was formed to increase the focus on prevention and to examine the social determinants of health. Among its charges, the Council developed the [National Prevention Strategy](#) to promote health, safety, and chronic disease prevention.

- The [Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#) develops strategies for disease prevention. The agency publishes the [Healthy People](#) series of national health goals every ten years, and jointly publishes, with the USDA, [Dietary Guidelines for Americans](#) every five years. In 2008, the agency published its first-ever [Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans](#).
- The [President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition](#) advises the President and the Secretary of Health and Human Services about how to encourage more Americans to be physically active. This advisory committee, comprised of citizen volunteers, works through partnerships with private, nonprofit, and public organizations to educate individuals about nutrition and physical activity.

OTHER FEDERAL AGENCIES

Although beyond the scope of this primer, other federal departments are involved in food-related regulatory and education issues. The Food and Drug Administration, Environmental Protection Agency, and Department of Justice regulate and enforce food safety standards. The Federal Trade Commission works to protect consumers from deceptive and unsubstantiated food advertising. In addition:

National Prevention Strategy

Established through the Affordable Care Act, the National Prevention Strategy aims to reduce negative health outcomes and rising health care costs through an emphasis on prevention and wellness for Americans in every life stage.

Department of Defense

The [Department of Defense](#) (DoD), through a partnership with USDA, established the [DoD Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program](#). The program leverages DoD's buying power to purchase a wide variety of high quality fresh fruits and vegetables at a minimal cost for use in school meal programs. The program has been extended to Indian reservations. In Federal Fiscal Year 2010, the program purchased \$66 million of produce for schools in 45 states.⁴

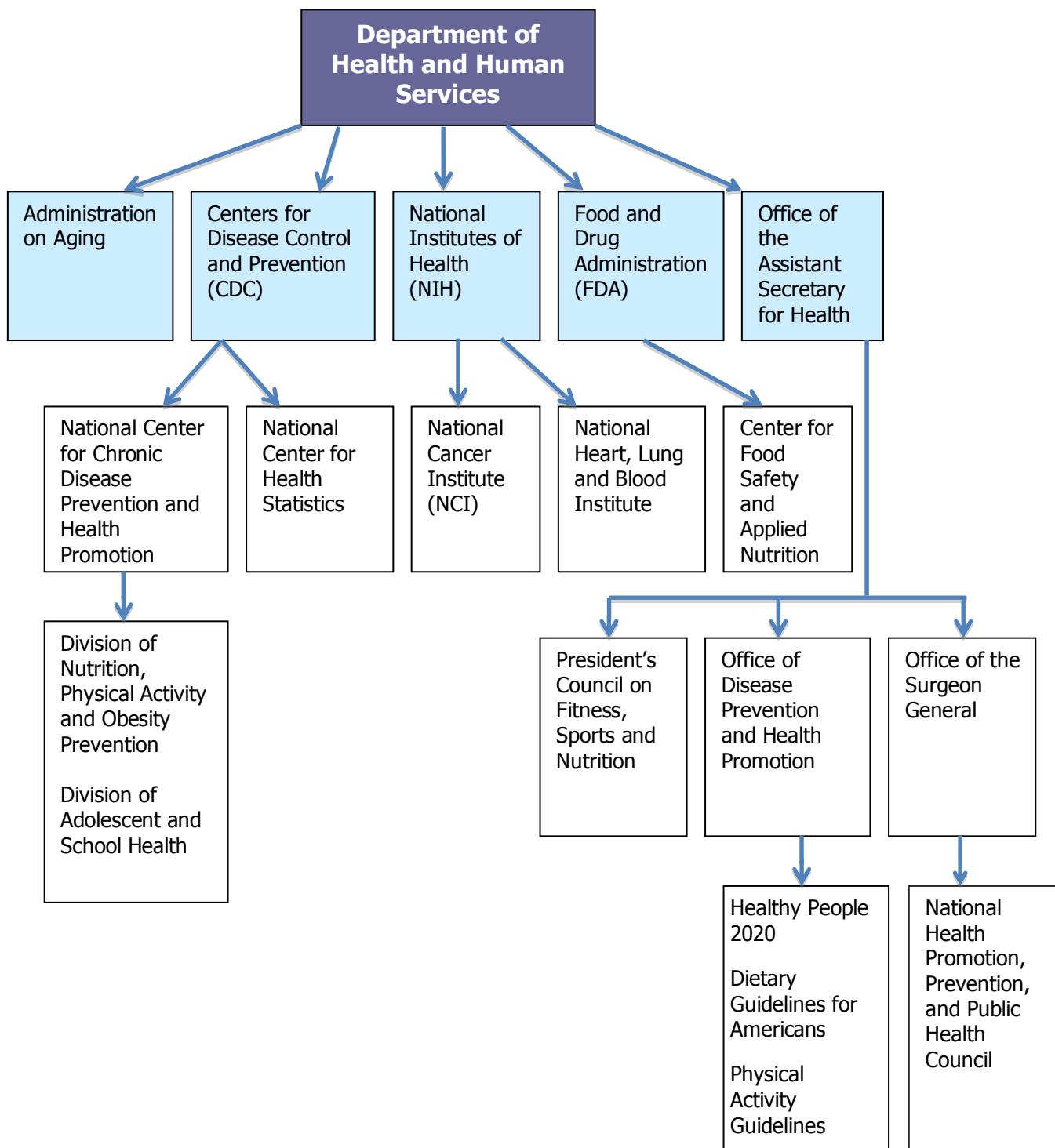
Department of Education

The [Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools](#), housed within the [Department of Education](#), awards grants to local educational agencies and community-based organizations to initiate, expand, or improve physical education programs, including after-school programs for students in one or more grades from Kindergarten to 12th grade. The [Carol M. White Physical Education Program \(PEP\)](#) grants are intended to help students make progress toward meeting state standards for physical education.

Department of Transportation

The [Department of Transportation](#) (DOT) administers the Federal [Safe Routes to School Program \(SRTS\)](#) through the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Safety. SRTS provides funding to state and local programs that support pedestrian and bike safety and encourages children to walk and bicycle to school. The [National Center for Safe Routes to School](#) acts as a clearinghouse for state-specific information and successful community programs.

**FIGURE 2: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
KEY NUTRITION OFFICES & PROGRAMS**





Let's Move!

To address escalating childhood obesity rates, First Lady Michelle Obama is leading a multi-faceted campaign to address physical inactivity and poor nutrition among children and youth in America. Launched in 2010, *Let's Move!* is designed to address these issues at the individual, school, community and policy levels.

Providing the foundation for *Let's Move!*, President Barack Obama established the [White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity](#). The Task Force is comprised of the Secretaries of the Interior, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and Education. Other members include the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, the Chief of Staff to the First Lady, the Assistant to the President on Economic Policy and executives from other departments and agencies.

The Task Force's mission is to develop a coordinated federal response and make recommendations to address the rise in childhood obesity rates. Its goal is to reduce the country's childhood obesity rate to five percent by 2030 – returning the nation to a rate last seen more than three decades ago. The Task Force released [Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity within a Generation](#) with the following recommendations:

- **Early Childhood Intervention:** Emphasis on high quality prenatal care, limiting “screen time,” support for breastfeeding, and quality child care settings that offer nutritious meals and opportunities for physical activity.
- **Empowering Parents and Caregivers:** Emphasis on nutrition education, understanding food labeling and marketing, and access to health care services.
- **Improve Quality of Food in Schools:** Emphasis on improving federally funded school lunch programs, improving the quality of other food available in schools, and increasing nutrition education in schools.
- **Increase Access to Healthy Food:** Emphasis on increasing availability and affordability of healthy foods, eliminating “food deserts,” addressing the issue of food insecurity in low-income communities, and reformulating food products to include healthier versions.
- **Increasing Opportunities for Physical Activity:** Emphasis on increasing opportunities for activity at school and out-of school, providing safe access to parks and playgrounds, and assessing neighborhood design and transportation systems that impact physical activity participation.

Let's Move! is designed to facilitate collaboration between business, government, schools, community and faith-based organizations, parents and caregivers, health care professionals, media, and other stakeholders to address childhood obesity. Its key programs focus on the Task Force's recommendations and establish benchmarks to measure success. These programs include:

- [Let's Move Cities, Towns and Counties](#) is designed for elected officials and community leaders to launch local obesity prevention campaigns via policy and infrastructure changes. Leaders must commit to efforts in four areas: reducing children's risk of developing obesity, improving school nutrition, increasing opportunities for physical activity, and increasing access to and availability of healthy and affordable food.
- [Chefs Move to Schools](#) matches chefs with local schools in an effort to improve the quality of school food. Chefs work with food service staff, school nutritionists, teachers and administrators to develop high quality, healthy school meals. Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the program also incorporates nutrition education for students and parents.
 - Schools can pledge to make healthy changes by joining the [HealthierUS Schools Challenge](#). Those that have made significant improvement earn recognition and financial rewards.
 - [Let's Move Salad Bars to Schools](#) is an initiative of the [United Fresh Produce Association Foundation](#), the [National Fruit and Vegetable Alliance](#), and the [Food Family Farming Foundation](#) in partnership with [Whole Foods Markets](#) to support the *Let's Move* campaign by helping schools introduce and support salad bars as part of the National School Lunch Program.
- [Let's Move Faith and Communities](#) is designed to help community and faith-based organizations improve the health of the communities they serve, as well as address local issues of food insecurity. Organizations must commit to three of four goals, including: host summer food service sites for low-income children, establish new exercise programs, host community gardens or farmers markets, or join with other organizations to walk a cumulative three million miles.
- [Let's Move Gardens and Museums](#) promotes physical activity and nutrition by encouraging families to visit public gardens, zoos, museums, and science-and-technology centers, and learn through interactive activities and exhibits.

- [Let's Move Outside](#) encourages children and their families to be physically active outdoors. Administered by the Department of the Interior, the program promotes outdoor activities in national parks and [Junior Ranger](#) programs across the country.
- [Let's Move Child Care](#) engages child care providers and parents to improve nutrition and physical activity while limiting screen time in child care settings by encouraging the implementation of the [Let's Move Child Care Checklist](#).
- [Let's Move in Indian Country](#) supports the existing efforts of tribal leaders to reduce obesity within Native American communities. The program facilitates partnerships among tribal leaders, community organizations, schools, Urban Indian Centers, and federal agencies to address issues of nutrition, physical activity and access to healthy and nutritious food.
- [Let's Move in the Clinic](#) encourages health care providers to counsel patients on the importance of proper nutrition and physical activity. The initiative encourages health care providers to make BMI screening a standard practice, to “prescribe” healthy habits, and to promote breastfeeding and healthy first foods. Health care providers are also encouraged to provide leadership in their communities as advocates for good nutrition and physical activity.

**To access additional modules in
Understanding Nutrition:
*A Primer on Programs and Policies in California***
go to
www.ccrwf.org

END NOTES

¹ Oliveira, V. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2011). *The food assistance landscape FY 2010* (Economic Information Bulletin No.6-8). Washington D.C.: ERS. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib6-8/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Department of Defense (n.d.) *Department of Defense fruit and vegetable program*. Retrieved May 26, 2011 from http://www.fns.usda.gov/fdd/programs/dod/DOD_FruitandVegetableProgram2011.pdf

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This module on the role of federal government is one component of *Understanding Nutrition: A Primer on Programs and Policies in California*. Go to www.ccrwf.org to access additional modules.

Patrice Chamberlain was the lead researcher for this module.

The primer was produced by the California Center for Research on Women and Families (CCRWF), in partnership with California Food Policy Advocates and the California Department of Public Health's *Network for a Healthy California (Network)*, a public health effort working with hundreds of partners and organizations to empower low-income Californians to live healthier lives through good nutrition and physical activity.

CCRWF thanks our funders, partners, advisors and reviewers for their contributions to the development of *Understanding Nutrition*, and takes full responsibility for errors and omissions. Please email comments to ccrwf@ccrwf.org.

Funded by USDA SNAP, known in California as CalFresh. • California Department of Public Health.



RECOMMENDED CITATION

Karpilow, K. A., Reed, D. F., Chamberlain, P.T., & Shimada, T. (October 2011). *Primer Module on the Role of Government – The Federal System*. In *Understanding Nutrition: A Primer on Programs and Policies in California* (2nd ed.). Sacramento, CA: California Center for Research on Women and Families, Public Health Institute. Available on the CCRWF website: www.ccrwf.org.

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