

USDA Announces Latest Actions to Combat Fraud and Enhance SNAP Program Integrity

Written by Amanda Browne
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Strengthened Measures Help Fight Fraud in Nation's Most Critical Nutrition Assistance Program

WASHINGTON, Feb. 6, 2012 – USDA Under Secretary Kevin Concannon today announced first quarter results for fiscal year 2012 in the effort to identify and eliminate fraudulent retailers from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). From October 1 through December 31, 2011, USDA staff took final actions to:

- Sanction, through fines or temporary disqualifications, more than 225 stores found violating program rules; and
- Permanently disqualify over 350 stores for trafficking in SNAP benefits (i.e. exchanging SNAP benefits for cash).

These enforcement actions are part of the Obama Administration's ongoing Campaign to Cut Waste and root out fraud and abuse in federal programs, including SNAP. While fraud is a relatively limited problem in SNAP – the violating stores represent less than ½ of one percent of more than 230,000 food stores authorized to redeem benefits – no level of fraud is tolerated. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service conducts ongoing surveillance and investigation, to find bad actors and remove them from the program. In fiscal year 2011, FNS reviewed over 15,000 stores, and permanently disqualified over 1,200 for program violations.

"I'm pleased to report today to American taxpayers the first quarter results of our anti-fraud efforts in 2012," said Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services Kevin Concannon. "Americans expect and deserve a government that ensures their hard-earned tax dollars are managed with accountability and integrity. We are committed to ensuring these dollars are spent as intended - helping millions of people in need through tough economic times

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until they can get back on their feet."

USDA is building upon strategies recently announced to further strengthen anti-fraud efforts in the retailer application process. To help reduce the number of disqualified stores that return to the program by falsifying information in their applications, USDA is announcing new measures to strengthen the program:

- Increasing documentation required for high-risk stores applying to redeem SNAP benefits to better verify their identity and assure their business integrity. High-risk stores are those located at the site of a previous disqualification.
- Verifying high-risk stores to confirm application information. High-risk stores are those located at the site of a previous disqualification. Store owners found to have falsified information with the intent to hide ownership or past violations will be charged, disqualified and may be liable for a \$10,000 fine or imprisonment for as long as 5 years or both.
- Continuing to notify state departments and federal agency partners about violators to better protect our public programs. This includes information on program recipients with suspicious transactions at stores known to be trafficking for further investigation by States.

In addition, USDA will soon publish a proposed rule strengthening sanctions and penalties for retailers who commit fraud in SNAP. USDA's new Fighting SNAP Fraud website (www.fns.usda.gov/fightingsnapfraud) will also help raise awareness of the issues and provide a direct portal to report suspicious activities.

"Fraud is not a static concept – we know that where there is a will to commit malfeasance, bad actors will try to find a way," said Concannon. "That's why USDA is constantly striving to stay ahead of the curve. The comparison I frequently make is in the area of cyber security. The need for continuously updating information security measures is frequently noted in the private sector, because hackers and other bad actors are always looking for ways to exploit systems."

"However, it is important not to demonize SNAP participants and retailers when referencing fraud because the vast majority of people participating in the program, both retailers and SNAP participants, abide by the rules. Our goal is to eliminate fraud and we will continue to crack down on individuals who violate the program and misuse taxpayer dollars," Concannon noted.

Concannon announced new anti-fraud activities in December. Today's announcement continues the USDA's commitment to promote integrity in SNAP, in order to assure the public's confidence in this critical nutrition assistance program that serves over 46 million low-income and working Americans.

USDA's Food and Nutrition Service administers 15 nutrition assistance programs that in addition to SNAP include the National School Lunch Programs, Special Supplemental Nutrition

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Program for Women, Infants and Children, and the Summer Food Service Program. Taken together, these programs serve as America's nutrition safety net.

Program fraud complaints of any kind may be filed with the USDA Office of Inspector General; contact information is found at: <http://www.usda.gov/oig/hotline.htm> . Fraud may also be reported to the appropriate States. Phone numbers are available at http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/contact_info/fraud.pdf

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