

## Transmittal of External Audit Report

**Instructions:** Per Department of Finance & Management Policy #7.0: **External Audit Reports**, departments are required to complete and submit this **coversheet** with a copy of the external audit report to the Commissioner of Finance & Management within 30 days of issuance of the final audit report. This coversheet must be submitted by the department's business office to ensure their awareness and acknowledgment of any potential financial impact. Official department responses to the audit report, including corrective action plans (*if required*), must also be submitted to Commissioner of Finance & Management upon completion.

<b>Department</b>	DCF/SNAP
<b>Business Office Contact</b>	Leslie Wisdom
<b>Program/Activity Audited</b>	SNAP Management Evaluation (ME) Emp & Training
<b>Audit Agency</b>	USDA FNS
<b>Audit Report Date</b>	05/16/2022

**1. Does the audit report contain any findings or recommendations?**

YES  NO

➤ If YES continue to question #2; otherwise coversheet is complete.

**2. Does the report contain any repeat audit findings?**

YES  NO

**3. Please rate the findings and/or recommendations contained in the audit report using the following scale; for reports with multiple findings, this overall rating should be based on the most critical finding:**

**Insignificant:** Nominal violation of policies, procedures, rules, or regulations. Corrective action suggested but not required.

**Notable:** Minor violation of policies, procedures, rules, or regulations and/or weak internal controls; and/or opportunity to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Corrective action may be required.

**Significant:** Significant violation of policies, procedures, rules, regulations or laws; and/or poor internal controls; and/or significant opportunity to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Corrective action required.

**Major:** Major violation of policies, procedures, rules, regulations or laws; and/or unacceptable internal controls; and/or high risk for fraud, waste or abuse; and/or major opportunity to improve effectiveness and efficiency. Immediate corrective action required.

**4. Is the department required to develop a corrective action plan (or similar) to address the audit findings and/or recommendations?**

YES  NO

➤ If YES continue to next question; otherwise skip to question #8.

## Transmittal of External Audit Report

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**5. Has the corrective action plan been developed?**

YES  NO [provide status below]

❖ Status of corrective action plan:

**6. Does the department anticipate any inability or delay in implementing its corrective action plan?**

YES  NO,

➤ If YES continue to next question; otherwise skip to question #8.

**7. What fiscal and programmatic impact is this inability or delay likely to have?**

**8. Does the report contain any disallowed costs<sup>1</sup>?**

YES  NO

➤ If YES list the amount(s) and page reference(s) below; otherwise skip to question #11.

Disallowed Amount \$	Audit Report Page #

Disallowed Amount \$	Audit Report Page #

**9. Has the method and timing of repayment for all disallowed costs been agreed upon with the applicable organization?**

YES  NO

**10. Assess the impact this disallowance will have on the:**

- a. Program/Activity:  Major  Significant  Minimal  None  
 b. Dept Overall Budget:  Major  Significant  Minimal  None

**11. Does the report contain any questioned costs<sup>2</sup>?**

YES  NO

➤ If YES list the amount(s) and page reference(s) below; otherwise form is complete.

Questioned Amount \$	Audit Report Page #

Questioned Amount \$	Audit Report Page #

**12. Assess the likelihood that the questioned costs will result in disallowances and/or reductions in future revenues:**

Very Likely  Likely  Somewhat Likely  Not Likely

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<sup>1</sup> Costs determined as unallowable under the applicable program/activity and not eligible for financial assistance; generally disallowed costs must be reimbursed to the awarding organization.

<sup>2</sup> Costs identified as potentially unallowable for financial assistance under the applicable program/activity.



**United States  
Department of  
Agriculture**

Food and  
Nutrition  
Service

Northeast Region

10 Causeway St.  
Room 501  
Boston, MA 02222

May 16, 2022

Nicole Tousignant  
Senior Policy and Operations Director  
Economic Services Division,  
Department for Children and Families  
G111, 280 State Drive  
Waterbury, VT 05671-1020

Dear Director Tousignant:

Enclosed is the Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2022 Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Management Evaluation (ME) report on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) operations of the Vermont (VT) Department for Children and Families (DCF) Economic Services Division (ESD). During the ME, FNS evaluated the following areas: Certification Program Access and State Management Evaluation Systems. Virtual review activities were conducted via the Teams platform with ESD and the local Barre District Office, during the weeks of February 14 and February 21, 2022. An exit conference was held on March 17, 2022.

The enclosed report contains a formal assessment of program operations with a summary of work, findings and required corrective actions, observations, and suggestions. This report identifies corrective actions that must be implemented within 60 days to meet regulatory requirements per 7 Code of Federal Regulations 275.3 and 275.17.

Please find attached the Corrective Action Response (CAR) Tool. This must be completed for each finding and submitted to this office within 60 days from the date of this letter. Each element of the CAR Tool is required. The CAR Tool must outline specific corrective action steps that are proposed or that have been implemented, and identify any long range corrective actions.

Please note that open findings from prior reviews must be addressed immediately to avoid escalation. If you require technical assistance, as always, my staff is available to assist you in whatever manner necessary.

We would like to express our gratitude to all VT staff that assisted in the review preparation and execution.

If you have any questions or concerns about the enclosed report or any aspect of this review, please contact Ellen Mei at (617) 565-6430 or [ellen.mei@usda.gov](mailto:ellen.mei@usda.gov).

Sincerely,

Bonnie Brathwaite, Director  
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program  
Northeast Region

Enclosure

cc: Amanda Beliveau  
Danica Griffin  
Karolyn Long  
Leslie Wisdom  
Aletha Cross  
Pam Dalley

FFY 2022

# Vermont Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Certification  
Program Access  
Review & State  
Management  
Evaluation Systems  
Management  
Evaluation Report  
February 2022



Supplemental  
Nutrition  
Assistance  
Program

Putting Healthy Food  
Within Reach



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## **I. Executive Summary**

### **Certification Program Access Review and State Management Evaluation Systems Virtual Combined Review Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Vermont February 2022**

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) combined virtual Certification Program Access Review (PAR) and State Management Evaluation (ME) Systems review is an ongoing assessment of your agency's administration of SNAP. The review provides the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) Northeast Regional Office (NERO) staff the opportunity to observe and evaluate the State agency's (SA) processes and procedures for complying with the requirements outlined in FNS regulations, handbooks, and FNS policy. Additionally, the review is an opportunity for regional staff to provide technical assistance regarding new regulations and policy interpretations that may be needed.

During the weeks of February 14 and February 21, 2022, FNS NERO conducted a combined virtual Certification Program Access and State ME Systems review of the Vermont Economic Services Division (ESD) Central Office and the Barre District Office (DO). Details on the areas selected for review are explained in the Scope and Methodology sections of the report.

The FNS review team also evaluated the State's progress in addressing findings from prior fiscal year MEs. Open findings, which are findings from previous fiscal years that have not been corrected by the State, warrant immediate attention and corrective action. Repeat findings are findings that are identical to previously cited (and subsequently closed) findings from prior reviews within a six-year period. Failure to address these findings within an acceptable amount of time may result in escalation, which could ultimately lead to administrative penalties for the State.

An Exit Conference was held on March 17th, 2022, to provide a summary of the work performed at the State agency and to discuss any anticipated findings and required corrective actions.

The results of the review were exemplary as this year's report contains zero findings and six observations for the Certification PAR and zero findings or observations for the State ME Systems review. Certification PAR observations address concerns related to inconsistency in requesting verification for potential deductions, online application usability, using social security numbers as case numbers, inconsistent use of delay codes, confusing timing of the notice of delay, and the language data analysis.

Information included in this report is the result of observations, interviews, case reviews and assessment of documents provided to FNS. This report details the observations and recommendations of NERO and requested updates on prior findings.

Though no findings were identified as part of this review, we request that the State submit new corrective action responses for specified prior year findings as noted in the report. A written update to the corrective actions detailed in the report must be submitted within sixty (60) calendar days of receipt of the report. The response must include a description of the corrective action steps for the finding, including implementation timeframes and supporting documentation as necessary. Additional details on the requirements for the corrective action response can be found in the report. Although not required by regulations, responses to FNS observations and suggestions are encouraged.

It should be noted that the level of understanding and knowledge displayed by staff concerning SNAP policies and regulations supports your agency's commitment to improving program access for the families that rely on nutrition assistance benefits. We wish to thank the entire ESD Central Office and the Barre District Office staff for their time and assistance extended to our office during the course of the review and in the development of this report.



## II. Definitions

**Corrective Action Response (CAR):** Actions that are proposed or taken by a State agency to respond to a finding of noncompliance with Federal regulations, FNS instructions, and/or policy memoranda. The term 'Required Corrective Action' is the element of the Management Evaluation (ME) report that conveys the action(s) that must be taken by the State agency to correct the noncompliance with Federal regulations, FNS instructions, and/or policy memoranda and prescribed by FNS for the State agency to move into compliance with Federal requirements and policy.

**Finding:** Identification of non-compliance with program regulations, FNS instructions, and/or policy memoranda, and/or other authoritative documents that must be corrected by the State agency. Each finding is associated with a required corrective action.

**Functional Areas:** Specific areas or components of program operations and administration performed by the State agency that are examined and evaluated in a ME/FMR such as certification and eligibility, program access, financial management, and local agency oversight.

**Management Evaluation (ME):** Periodic compliance assessment of State agency or local program operations and administration resulting in a report of findings, observations, and noteworthy initiatives.

**ME Report:** Formal, comprehensive report of the ME review that typically includes findings, required corrective actions, observations, suggestions, and noteworthy initiatives.

**Noteworthy Initiatives:** Projects, processes, and practices worthy of recognition and sharing with other States agencies for replication in an effort to improve program operations.

**Observation:** Identification of a weakness in program operations or management that is not in violation of program regulations, FNS instructions, and/or policy memoranda, and/or authoritative documents. Each observation is associated with a suggestion.

**Open Finding:** A finding in which the corrective action has not been implemented by the State agency and/or validated by FNS.

**Repeat Finding:** A finding that is identical to a previously cited, closed finding that is discovered at the same State agency in at least one of the reviews conducted within the continuous six-year period immediately preceding the ME.

**Required Corrective Action:** A statement in the ME report that conveys the action(s) that must be taken by the State agency to correct noncompliance with Federal regulations, FNS instructions, and/or policy memoranda. Required corrective actions are prescribed by FNS but may have input by the State agency. The State agency is required to provide a Corrective Action Response to FNS' required corrective action. All required corrective actions must be

validated by FNS to ensure the State agency has implemented the corrective action and that the corrective action has addressed the violation prior to closing the applicable finding(s).

***Suggestion:*** A statement of actions that should be considered by the State agency to correct an observation of a weakness.

### III. Acronyms

CAP	Corrective Action Plan
CAR	Corrective Action Response
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DCF	Department for Children and Families
DIP	District Implementation Plan
DO	District Office
ESD	Economic Services Division
FFY	Federal Fiscal Year. The FFY runs from October 1st to September 30th
FNS	Food and Nutrition Service
ME	Management Evaluation
NERO	Northeast Regional Office
PAR	Program Access Review
SA	State Agency
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
VT	Vermont

#### IV. Introduction

FNS would like to thank the ESD Central Office and the Barre DO for their time, effort, and labor in preparing and executing this combined review.

FNS NERO conducted a virtual combined Certification PAR and State ME Systems review of VT's Food and Nutrition Programs at the Central Office and the Barre DO during the weeks of February 14 and February 21, 2022.

On Thursday, February 3, 2022, FNS received an overview and walk through of the State's online application process. An entrance conference was conducted on Tuesday, February 15, 2022. FNS conducted a State policy interview, which included representation from policy, field operations, and training staff on Thursday, February 17, 2022. Interviews with two Operations Managers, two Supervisors, and two Benefit Program Specialists (BPS) from the Barre DO were conducted on February 16 and 17, 2022. An interview with two managers of the Application Document Processing Center (ADPC) was conducted on February 23, 2022. This report is based on the results of the review of case files and documentation provided to FNS prior to the review and interviews with the ESD Central Office and Barre DO staff. An exit conference was held on Thursday, March 17, 2022, to provide a summary of the work performed during the review and to discuss any anticipated findings, observations, and required corrective actions. FNS provided the State with the case review summary results for all cases that were reviewed and identified by FNS to have issues.

The following table identifies the State Agency staff supporting the review and the FNS review team members:

Table 1

Name	Title	Organization
Leslie Wisdom	Food & Nutrition Program Director	ESD
Aletha Cross	Benefits Program Administrator	ESD
Emily Hammond	Benefits Program Assistant Administrator	ESD
Jessica Duranleau	Benefits Program Assistant Administrator	ESD
Melanie Smit	ESD Operations Director	ESD
Andy Lange	Economic Benefits Director	ESD
Bridgette Kew	Economic Services Supervisor	ESD
James Crisante	Economic Services Supervisor	ESD
Caitlyn Paquin	Senior Benefits Programs Specialist	ESD
Joanne Dunster	Senior Benefits Programs Specialist	ESD
Jesse Haven	ADPC Supervisor	ESD
Jamie Cote	ADPC Supervisor	ESD

Robin Magee	Team Lead	FNS-NERO
Ellen Mei	Program Specialist	FNS-NERO
Beth Soukhanov	Program Specialist	FNS-NERO
Maria Volpe	Program Specialist	FNS-NERO

## V. Objective

The main objective of the Certification PAR portion of this combined review was to determine the State’s compliance with Federal statutory law and implementing regulations, and policies and directives applicable to the federally funded SNAP Program. This review focused on the State’s certification requirements and assessed whether the State’s policies and procedures regarding initial application processing, certification, certification notices, and access-related requirements, including those for households eligible for expedited service, complied with SNAP requirements. This SNAP ME also identified any impermissible processes or eligibility criteria imposed by the State that present barriers to participation by eligible households.

The main objective of the State ME Systems portion of this combined review was to assess the State’s compliance in monitoring local office operations and meeting the regulatory review requirements outlined in 7 CFR 275; to assess the adequacy of the State’s ME review process, methodology, and review materials, the State’s ME plan, and the State’s corrective action process as required in 7 CFR 275; and to ensure the State follows up and resolves problems found at local offices.

## VI. Scope

### Certification Program Access Review

FNS reviewers conducted the virtual Certification PAR of ESD’s Central Office and the Barre DO during the week of February 14, 2022. FNS assessed the State’s compliance with Federal policy, approved waivers, and its State Plan of Operations. FNS reviewers interviewed Central Office policy staff, ADPC staff, and DO staff including two Operations Managers, two Supervisors, and two BPS. FNS reviewed 40 case files for cases that were initial approvals from the month of November 2021 and 18 denied cases from the month of November 2021. Results of the case reviews were provided to the State for review and comment.

### State Management Evaluation Systems

FNS reviewers conducted the virtual State ME Systems review of the ESD Central Office and the Barre DO during the week of February 21, 2022. FNS assessed the State’s compliance in monitoring local office operations, the adequacy of the State’s ME review process, methodology, and review materials, the adequacy of the State’s ME plan, and the adequacy of the State’s corrective action process. FNS reviewers interviewed the Barre DO Supervisors, State ME Systems Coordinator/Reviewer, and State ME Systems Supervisors. FNS conducted a

virtual follow-up review of 20 cases that the State reviewed during its FFY 2021 ME of the Barre DO. The 20 cases reviewed consisted of 5 initial approvals, 5 initial denials, 5 terminations, and 5 interim reports.

## VII. Methodology

The virtual review was conducted in accordance with FNS and SNAP ME Guidance and utilized procedures and requirements set forth in the SNAP ME review guides for the Certification PAR and the State ME Systems review.

Specific evidence gathering practices used during the review include:

- Interviews with ESD Central Office and Barre DO staff;
- Review of policy and training documentation and client notices;
- Review of the State’s approved waivers;
- Review of the State’s ME plan and schedule; and
- Review of client case files.

Additional details on each of the above practices are provided below.

### Interviews

The FNS review team conducted interviews via the Microsoft Teams platform with the State’s Central Office and the Barre DO staff. FNS used an interview protocol designed to elicit information on the SNAP certification requirements process. The protocol contained general questions and State-specific questions based on State selected SNAP policy options and waivers. FNS conducted virtual interviews with two Operations Managers, two Supervisors, two BPS, four members of the VT Central Office policy team, and two managers of the ADPC. State Management selected the participants in each group. The interviews were conducted with the following individuals during the review:

Table 2

<b>Staff Interviews</b>		
<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Leslie Wisdom	Food & Nutrition Program Director	
Aletha Cross	Benefits Program Administrator	
Emily Hammond	Benefits Program Assistant Administrator	
Jessica Duranleau	Benefits Program Assistant Administrator	
Melanie Smit	ESD Operations Director	
Andy Lange	Economic Benefits Director	
Bridgette Kew	Economic Services Supervisor	

James Crisante	Economic Services Supervisor	
Caitlyn Paquin	Senior Benefits Programs Specialist	
Joanne Dunster	Senior Benefits Programs Specialist	
Jesse Haven	ADPC Supervisor	
Jamie Cote	ADPC Supervisor	

Two questionnaires were forwarded to the State for the State ME Systems review prior to the review week and were used for follow-up interviews with the State ME Coordinator/Reviewer and the Barre DO Supervisor.

The FNS review team forwarded questionnaires to three separate SNAP Advocacy Groups and received one completed advocacy questionnaire. The questionnaires focused on identifying any concerns the advocacy groups have with the State’s administration of SNAP. Concerns raised by the advocacy group include: the unavailability of forms in languages other than English, an antiquated online application system that is difficult for applicants to use, and long call center wait times.

**Data Collection and Review**

**Certification Program Access Review**

In accordance with FNS ME guidance, FNS requested all the initial approved and denied SNAP applications in the month of November of 2021 from the Barre DO. The FNS review team utilized the Certification PAR case file review protocol from the most recent ME guidance to ensure each case was reviewed in a consistent manner and that all areas of SNAP Federal requirements were reviewed.

**State ME Systems Review**

In accordance with FNS ME guidance, FNS requested a list of cases reviewed by the State during the State’s FFY 2021 ME review of the Barre DO.

The FNS review team worked with two Benefits Program Assistant Administrators to re-review the case files in the State’s eligibility system. The FNS review team utilized the corresponding PAR case file review protocols from the most recent ME guidance to ensure each case was reviewed in a consistent manner and that all areas of SNAP Federal requirements were reviewed.

**Policy and Training Review**

Prior to the onsite review, FNS requested various notices and policy and training documents related to the State’s application processing protocols and verification requirements to determine how staff are instructed and trained.

Table 3 identifies the training materials and guidance received by FNS and used as part of this review.

Table 3

Title
3SquaresVT Program Manual
ESD Training “The Application Process”
DCF All Program Procedures P-2110 General Application Procedures
DCF All Program Rules, 2020 Application Procedures
ESD Training “Verifications, Documentation, Interim reports, and Recertification”
ESD Verification Matrix
Tool #1 Information to Determine Eligibility
Tool #2 SNAP Application Checklist
Tool #3 Online Application Questionnaire
MDO-Phone-Interpreter-Instructions
Management Evaluation Plan Review Worksheets and Questionnaires
ESD District Implementation Plans for Continuous Quality Improvement

**Notices**

Prior to the onsite review and during the case file reviews, the FNS team reviewed the following notices:

- Notice of Eligibility
- Notice of Approval
- Notice of Expedited Approval
- Notice of Missed Interview
- Notice of Denial
- Notice of Required Verification
- Notice of Pending Status

**Case File Reviews**

The FNS review team reviewed a total of 58 case files from a random sample from the Barre DO caseload for the Certification PAR; this included 40 initial approvals and 18 denial case files. The FNS review team re-reviewed a total of 20 cases from a random sample of the cases that State ME reviewers reviewed during the State’s FFY 2021 State ME; this included 5 initial approvals, 5 initial denials, 5 terminations, and 5 interim reports. The purpose of the case file review for the Certification PAR was to determine if the local office is processing cases in compliance with Federal program requirements, to verify processes and procedures discovered during interviews and observations, and provide additional context to FNS. The purpose of the case file review for the State ME review was to evaluate the effectiveness of the State’s performance reporting system and determine if the State is adequately evaluating its own SNAP application processing.

For the Certification PAR the FNS review team worked with Benefits Program Assistant Administrators virtually to review case files in the State’s eligibility system, ACCESS. The FNS review team used the certification case file review protocol to ensure each case was reviewed in a consistent manner and that all areas of SNAP Federal requirements were reviewed.



The results of the case file reviews were provided to the State for review and comment.

Table 4

Type of Cases	# of Cases Reviewed in Cert PAR	# of Cases Reviewed in State ME Systems Review
Approved	40	5
Denied	18	5
Interim Reports	0	5
Terminations	0	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>20</b>

**Observations**

The FNS review team did not observe any local office processing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual nature of the review.

**VIII. Noteworthy Initiatives**

An area of excellence that FNS recognizes within VT’s State ME process is the use of District Implementation Plans (DIP) prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. During documentation review and interviews with the State ME staff, FNS learned about DO use of DIPs. In the past, DOs were instructed to add their ME findings to the DIP and address them as an ongoing part of their overall district performance. One-on-one training due to issues noted on the DIP may have been created by the district management team or requested from the State’s training unit. Desk aids were developed as part of the DIPs and peer reviews were part of this process as well. These plans were paused due to covid, but the State noted their intention to bring these back. FNS commends the State’s prior use of DIPs as a quality assurance process for DOs.

**IX. Findings and Required Corrective Actions**

**Certification Program Access Review**

The review team examined all specified review elements within the Certification Program Access Review at Local Offices Review Guide and did not find any new findings. However, please refer to the Open Findings section of this report as FNS is requesting that the State provide updated CAR tools to address open findings FNS identified during this review.

**State Management Evaluation Systems Review**

The FNS review team examined all specified review elements within the State ME Systems Review Guide and found all elements to be compliant with Program requirements.

## Observations and Suggestions

### Certification Program Access Review Observations

**Observation 1:** The State does not consistently request that clients submit verifications for deductions to which they may be entitled. During case file reviews, FNS identified cases where applicants had childcare and medical deductions, however the applicants were not asked to submit verifications. FNS also reviewed two cases where the BPS did request that applicants submit documentation for medical deductions for which they were potentially eligible, however the language in these requests were not consistent with each other.

**Suggestion 1:** FNS suggests that the State be more proactive in consistently requesting that applicants submit verification documents that will allow them to claim deductions to which they are entitled. Beginning this process now will lessen the burden on BPS as maximum allotments come to an end and recipients can receive only the benefits to which they are entitled.

**Observation 2:** FNS observed that it has been six years since the State has completed a formal Language Data Analysis, and there is no set schedule for updating the analysis.

**Suggestion 2:** While there is no requirement as to how often the Language Data Analysis be completed, FNS recommends that the State align their Language Data Analysis with the Census Data, which is updated every 10 years, or the American Community Survey data, which is updated every 5 years, as that is the standard that FNS' Civil Rights division uses.

**Observation 3:** The State is using clients' social security numbers as case numbers. During case file reviews, FNS identified that the State uses a client's social security number as their case number. FNS has concerns pertaining to data privacy and the risk to client's personal identifiable information related to the use of social security numbers as case numbers.

**Suggestion 3:** FNS recommends that the State consider using a different method for determining case numbers, especially as the State transitions to a new eligibility system.

**Observation 4:** Clients are not able to access/edit verification documents they submit via VT's online application portal. During staff interviews and during the Online Application overview, it was noted that the client has the ability to upload verification documents but cannot view these documents once they are uploaded. SNAP clients have no way of knowing if the documents they submitted are readable.

**Suggestion 4:** FNS recommends that ESD consider making documents that clients submit through the Uploader visible and accessible to clients, especially as the State transitions to a new eligibility system.

**Observation 5:** The procedures by which BPS enter the delay codes are inconsistent. During interviews with Benefits Program Specialists, there was an inconsistent understanding of when they are supposed to enter the delay codes on a client case to determine which notice of delay the client will receive.

**Suggestion 5:** If the State continues to use delay codes to generate the notice of delay, FNS recommends that the State train workers on a consistent procedure for entry of the delay codes.

**Observation 6:** The timing of the notice of delay can be confusing for applicants. During case file reviews, FNS observed cases where a notice of delay stating that the State was not yet able to make a decision on an applicant's case was followed by a notice of decision on the same or following day. This can cause confusion for the applicants as to the status of their case.

**Suggestion 6:** FNS recommends that the State revisit and revise the timeframes that the notice of delay goes out and the BPS sends out the notice of decision. Alternatively, FNS recommends that the State give BPS the ability to prevent the notice of delay from going out if they are able to process eligibility for an applicant on the day that a notice of delay is generated by the system.

#### **State Management Evaluation Systems Review Observation**

FNS did not identify any observations from the State Management Evaluation Systems review.

## Corrective Action Response

As stipulated in 7 CFR 275.3 and 275.16, Vermont is required to provide a written response identifying its corrective actions outlined in this ME report. The CAR is due within **60 calendar days** of the date of this ME report. Please complete each element of the CAR tool detailed below.

Finding Name:		
Finding Language:		
Finding Evaluation:		
Root Cause Analysis:	1. -	2. -
CA steps & timeline:	1. -	2. -
Date of Completion	1. -	2. -
Monitor & Point of Contact	1. -	2. -
Documentation	1. -	2. -

### Finding Naming Convention:

FNS has assigned each finding a unique identifier following the naming convention below in the ME report.

- The type of review: CERT PAR, Reporting PAR, RECERT PAR, State ME Systems, ABAWD, ET, SNAPED, INTEG, QC, CAPER, EBT, QCSTATS, CLAIMS, TOP
- The last two digits of the FFY the review took place in where the finding was identified: e.g. if a finding resulted from a review in FFY 2021, (21) would be the first two digits in the finding name.
- Finally, a number (1, 2, 3, 4) assigned by FNS that would stay with the finding until it's closed.
- 

### Finding Language:

FNS has provided the language for each finding in the CAR tool that corresponds with the Finding name provided.

### Finding Evaluation:

The State must conduct its own evaluation of the finding to include a review of the regulations and guidance pertaining to the finding. The State should evaluate the magnitude of the

deficiency. Is it a systemic issue affecting a large portion of the case load or a minimal effect on a small portion of cases? Please comment on the geographic nature of the finding as well (Statewide concern vs. localized).

Root Cause Analysis:

The State must conduct a root cause analysis of the finding. The State should consult the background section of FNS's report on that specific finding, but not solely rely on it. The FNS review team is only onsite for a limited time and cannot be expected to identify completely the root cause of an issue. The State should number the root causes, because in many cases, there will be more than one root cause. The cause(s) could potentially include eligibility systems issues, training of eligibility staff, notice language, policy interpretation, etc.

CA Steps & Timeline:

The State must then complete the Corrective Action steps for each root cause. Please use the same numbers for each root cause in the section as well; e.g. root cause #1 is addressed by CA step #1. Each numbered step should thoroughly address each root cause. The State should anticipate steps that might not be documented or assessed. For instance, if the root cause to the finding is strictly systems related, the State should consider if a systems change were to take place, would that result in a need to conduct training for eligibility staff to ensure the State operates within compliance. If a root cause requires more than one Corrective Action step, the State should name those Corrective Action steps 1A, 1B, and so on. For instance, the root cause may be a systems issues, the CA steps could be #1A- fix systems issues, #1B- provide appropriate training to eligibility staff.

Date of Completion

The State must provide the exact or expected date of completion for each Corrective Action step. Please use the same numbers for each root cause and Corrective Action step. The State should provide at a minimum, the month and year, the Corrective Action step is expected to be completed.

Monitor & Point of Contact:

For each Corrective Action step and root cause, the State must detail who is in charge of monitoring the step and what activities will take place to ensure implementation of the Corrective Action.

Documentation:

If applicable, the State should detail the documentation required to validate the Corrective Action for each finding. The documentation itself could be attached to the response, or provided later, but the detail of the document can be included in the table. For instance, if an eligibility system change is required, FNS would want to review the systems change request which could be attached to the response. In the tool, the State would briefly detail what documentation is being provided (or anticipated) and what root cause/Corrective Action step it

addresses. To further stress here, FNS is not expecting actual supporting documents to be included in the tool, but merely a description of each attachment. For example, if a JIRA ticket #4 is meant to address a needed systems change related to tracking ABAWDs in a States eligibility system, the actual JIRA ticket could be attached to the response, but in the CAR tool a bullet could be added stating *JIRA #4 addresses needed systems change related to tracking ABAWDs*.

## **X. Open Findings**

The following are State findings from previous FNS ME reviews that are still open. The findings listed below are limited to those open findings pertaining to the scope of this review. As a reminder, FNS cannot close a review until corrective actions have been implemented for all findings, and FNS has validated the implementation

**Finding: Reporting PAR 21.3 The State is not in compliance with bilingual requirements.**

**Citation: Section 11(e)(1)(B) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008; 7 CFR 272.4(b)(1)**

**Background:** Section 11(e)(1)(B) of The Food and Nutrition Act requires States to comply with FNS regulations that require bilingual personnel and printed materials in areas that have a substantial number of members of low-income households that speak a language other than English. Federal regulations at 7 CFR 272.4(b)(1) state, that “...*the State agency shall provide bilingual program information and certification materials, and staff or interpreters as specified in paragraphs (b) (2) and (3) of this section.*” During the review, FNS found that the process in which a client requests a bilingual notice unduly burdensome. The client must request each individual notice to be translated. When the client makes the request, the worker then must request the notice be sent out of the office to be translated. The timeframes in which notices could be translated would not allow a notice to be transmitted timely to the household.

**Corrective Action:** The State must comply with bilingual requirements of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008. Clients that request notices to be translated must receive the notices in a timely manner. The State’s CAR must provide a detailed timeline for implementing a process that will allow the State to have notices translated and for clients to receive them timely. As the State transitions to a new eligibility system, it must also allow for client’s preferred language to be captured so that notices will automatically be sent to clients in their preferred language.

**Status:** FNS acknowledges that the State has an open IT ticket for the system to capture a client’s preferred language for receiving communications. FNS is managing this finding under the semi-annual Corrective Action Plan process.

**Finding: LPAR 17.1: (repeat) Case file documentation does not sufficiently detail reasonableness and accuracy of the determination.**

**Citation: 7 CFR 273.2(f)(6)**

**Background:** FNS reviewers identified several cases where case notes and supporting documentation were missing from the client's file. Instances were found in which case files insufficiently documented details of a SNAP benefit determination or case processing action taken by a previous worker. Specifically, several cases showed actions taken on the case as result of a Department for Employment and Training (DET) wage match but there was no way to substantiate the DET wage match in the case record. Additionally, while the State has an interview case action note (CATN) template, FNS identified several cases where the CATN was not used, which led to missing case notes and confusion amongst subsequent workers processing the case. 7 CFR 273.2(f)(6) states, *"Case files must be documented to support eligibility, ineligibility, and benefit level determinations. Documentation shall be in sufficient detail to permit a reviewer to determine the reasonableness and accuracy of the determination."*

**Corrective Action:** The SA must ensure that case files are documented to reflect eligibility, ineligibility, case actions, and benefit determination. The State's CAP should detail a standard case management procedure to ensure that case documentation uses consistent case notations and shorthand, preferably through the use of standard abbreviations for many common case processing actions. Please include an example of a standard case documentation as well as any training initiatives to address this finding.

**Status:** FNS attempted to validate this finding as a part of the FFY 2021 Reporting Program Access Review. FNS was unable to validate this finding and found the State is still not documenting case files consistently. During the case file review, the level of detail found within case comments varied. FNS is managing this finding under the semi-annual Corrective Action Plan process.

#### **Finding: CAPER 16.2: Failure to Act on Verification**

**Background:** FNS reviewers identified multiple cases where received verifications were not acted on by the SA and resulted in a denial or closure of a client's case at initial application or recertification. Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(h)(3)(i) state, in part, *"Whenever a delay in the initial 30-day period is the fault of the State agency, the State agency shall take immediate corrective action. The State Agency shall not deny the application if it caused the delay."* Regarding recertifications, 7 CFR 273.14(e)(1) states, *"If an eligible household files an application before the end of the certification period but the recertification process cannot be completed within 30 days after the date of application because of State agency fault, the State agency must continue to process the case and provide a full month's allotment for the first month of the new certification period."*

**Corrective Action:** The SA must ensure that verification practices and procedures follow appropriate Federal regulations. While onsite, FNS reviewers learned that there can be up to a 72-hour delay from when documentation is received and when it is accessible to view by eligibility workers through OnBase. The SA should explore options to expedite this process and/or develop procedures to ensure all verifications are acted on.

**Status:** FNS is managing this finding under the semi-annual Corrective Action Plan process.

**Finding: LPAR 15.1: Incorrect Language on Notice of Pending Status**

**Citation: 7 CFR 273.10(g)(1)(iii)**

**Background:** FNS reviewers identified three cases in which the notices of pending status included both State and client-caused delay language. If a case is held pending because some action is required of the household, a Federal regulation at §273.10(g)(1)(iii) requires that the State clearly inform the household of the action it must take. The notices in question are not compliant with this regulation because in each case it is unclear whether the household or the State must take action in order to address the pending status of the case.

**Corrective Action:** The SA must ensure that notices of pending status accurately inform households what action, if any, must be taken to complete the application process. During the review, State staff indicated that they were aware of the issue and had been working with the State's information technology staff to resolve it.

**Status:** FNS approved the notice language on 4/20/21 and the State put the new notice into production on 2/18/22. During the week of 2/21/22, FNS received and reviewed a copy of the corrected notice that was sent to a household. Through this review, FNS understands that the State does not currently, nor does it intend to, use the notice of delay as the notice of pending status. The notice of delay currently states that clients must "submit the missing information by the 60<sup>th</sup> day from the date of application. If [a client] does not, the application will be denied. However, because the State is not pending cases, the notice should state that the application will be denied if the verification documentation is not submitted by the date listed on the previously sent verification request. FNS requests the State to provide an updated CAR Tool and a copy of the revised draft notice that reflects the updated language.

**Finding: SPAR: 14.2 Paper and online SNAP applications do not comply with Federal regulations**

**Citation: 7 CFR 273.2(b)(1)(v)**

**Background:** Reviewers evaluated the following applications:

1. 202 - Application for ESD Programs - revised 1/14
2. VT Online Application

Appendix I at the end of this report presents a summary of the missing or incomplete elements found in each of these application reviews. A detailed chart with a description of each requirement was provided to DCF during the review and can be shared again with the SA upon request.

**Corrective Action:** All versions of DCF's SNAP application must meet required language and



eligibility requirements in the CFR, Tri-Agency Guidance, and applicable Federal laws. Due to the complex language and functionality requirements for SNAP, it is recommended that DCF utilize FNS for technical assistance when preparing corrective actions or developing new paper and online applications that include SNAP.

**Status:** FNS understands that the State intends to address this finding as part of the Integrated Eligibility and Enrollment project.

Additionally, FNS noted during the online application walk through that though applicants can navigate to any page of the application by using the drop-down menu at the bottom of the screen, it is not made clear to the applicant that they can use the drop-down menu to navigate to the signature screen and submit their application at any time. Federal regulations at 7 CFR 273.2(b)(1)(v), with which the State is already out of compliance as part of this SPAR 14.2 finding, state that the SNAP application form shall contain “In plain and prominent language on or near the front page of the application, notification of the household's right to immediately file the application as long as it contains the applicant's name and address and the signature of a responsible household member or the household's authorized representative.”

The State must provide an updated CAR tool that provides steps that it will take to make applicants aware that they can use the drop-down menu to navigate to application submission. The updated CAR tool should also address the State’s plan to allow an applicant to submit an application with only name, address, and signature without requiring clients to create an account with their email address in order to submit an application.