

The Ag Improvement Act of 2018 – Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (Sec. 4205)

One of the 2018 farm bill successes for healthy food system advocates is the expansion of the Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive program (FINI), the SNAP incentive grant program established in the 2014 farm bill which continued to garner bipartisan and bicameral support. The program was renamed in honor of longtime NSAC friend, former USDA Under Secretary, and Wholesome Wave co-founder Gus Schumacher, who was lauded in the conference committee report as “a magnificent advocate for farmers and families (who) saw the importance in building access and affordability through incentive programs.” The many NSAC member groups conducting incentive programs can attest to the truth of the statement.

The new and improved Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (which we will refer to as FINI here for simplicity’s sake), is funded at \$250 million a year for 5 years, making it a permanent part of future farm bills.

While the new FINI program continues the SNAP incentive grants program, it integrates some new program improvements that are a direct result of feedback from NSAC members and other FINI grantees. This includes new funding for technical assistance, information sharing, and a simplified reporting system, as well as the addition of a produce prescription provision of the Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP).

Here are details:

SNAP Incentives: Competitive grants for SNAP point-of-sale fruit and vegetable incentives have total funding of up to \$187 million in fiscal year 2019 through fiscal year 2023. These grants can go to public or nonprofit organizations and require a 50 percent non-federal cash or in-kind match.

Produce Prescriptions: Competitive grants for programs that provide “prescriptions” to encourage produce consumption through financial, educational, or other incentives will receive a maximum of \$25 million over 5 years. These do not require a 50% non-federal match, but do need coordination with healthcare providers, and data collection to assess whether the approach can reduce healthcare spending.

Technical Assistance & Reporting: There is a total of \$38 million over 5 years to establish training, technical assistance, information, and evaluation center(s). The goal of these is to support:

- a. the development and dissemination of best practices,

- b. provide intensive support for programs in high-need areas,
- c. coordinate among incentive practitioners, point of sale and electronic payment companies, grocers and farm direct retailers, and federal and state SNAP agencies on the development and sharing of improved and cost-effective SNAP and incentive transaction systems,
- d. develop a centralized hub for the reporting of standardized program data to reduce duplication and ensure consistent information collection. The information will be used for annual reporting to Congress and USDA and will be publicly searchable in a way that will facilitate connections between programs and further research in the field. The USDA Secretary is encouraged to consult with a range of stakeholders and former grantees on the design and implementation of the training, TA, information and evaluation center(s).

FINI continues to emphasize a link to local and regional agriculture and direct marketing. It also supports programs in tribal communities by allowing Indian Health Service funds to be used as match and expands the program to include Puerto Rico, which receives a block grant instead of SNAP. Finally, it reduces grantee administration substantially by streamlining reporting and facilitating coordination to solve common challenges and share technological solutions.

What's Next?

The implementation timeline for the new FINI program remains a mystery. The government shutdown has stalled any progress on deciding how the produce prescription grants will be administered, gathering feedback for the new support centers, or developing a bidding process to award those funds. In addition, the lion's share of the FINI program implementation is done by NIFA staff so the uncertainty created by the USDA Secretary's desire to move the agency out of Washington DC may slow the process even more.

Regardless the expanded FINI program remains a serious win in the 2018 farm bill for families and farmers, and speaks to the power of practitioners sharing the real successes such programs are having in communities nationwide.