Donald E. Arnette is nominated for the Roger W. Jones Award for Executive Leadership for his exemplary leadership and management contributions to the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). As Deputy Administrator for Management from 2002 through mid-2004, he supported the office of the Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services’ (FNCS) Under Secretary and its two agency administrators, directing program operations in Administrative Services, Civil Rights, Human Resources, Information Technology and Property Management that affected approximately 1,600 agency employees in Headquarters and seven regional offices. He was the principal architect behind significantly improved business practices which moved the Management Division to a customer-centered, modern organization that integrated systems and business process solutions. As Regional Administrator for the FNS Southeast Region since July 2004, Mr. Arnette has oversight for 15 Federal Nutrition Assistance programs serving over 22 million persons through an annual operation and program benefits budget of $21 billon. He has forged solid working partnerships with states and other stakeholders in FNS programs that culminate in the successful execution of agency goals. He has built shared visions and saved multi-millions of taxpayer dollars and greatly improved the integrity of federal nutrition assistance programs. His record of exemplary leadership and success is without question.

PROGRAM RESULTS

FNS programs are the Nation’s food safety net with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as its cornerstone. Among the seven FNS regions, the Southeast Region serves more than 22 percent of the national SNAP caseload. Mr. Arnette’s resolve, steadfastness and focus helped identify issues facing southeast states that manage the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Due to his diligence and commitment to the accurate payment of SNAP benefits, he prioritized the issue of erroneous benefit payments and their potential impact on the Program’s integrity which resulted in southeast states improving their combined payment accuracy rates from 94.09% in FY 2006 to 97.41% in FY 2010. Mr. Arnette’s region has had the highest payment accuracy rate for three consecutive years among all FNS regions. His efforts enhanced the Program’s image and combated fraud, waste and abuse. The Region’s cumulative accurate payment of client benefits led to a cost savings exceeding $214 million in taxpayer dollars between FY 2006 – FY 2010. Most noteworthy, is Florida’s attainment of an unprecedented payment accuracy rate of 99.15% in FY 2008; 99.30% in FY 2009, and 99.22% in FY 2010 placing Florida in the enviable position of having achieved the highest Payment Accuracy rates in the nation. By a letter dated September 17, 2010, USDA Secretary Vilsack personally recognized and applauded Florida’s achievement stating in part, “Florida’s Department of Children and Families has led the nation this Year….in the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program)…by achieving the highest rate of program eligibility accuracy in the United States.”

The Nation’s recent economic downturn caused a surge in the number of persons participating in the SNAP program and automatically caused families with school age children to qualify for free school breakfast and lunch through Direct Certification. Recognizing that 50% of SNAP participants are children eligible for free school breakfast and lunch, Mr. Arnette met with the region’s state Commissioners for SNAP and the Department of Education and secured their support to perform Direct Certification more frequently. His appeal to leadership in Alabama, Florida and South Carolina is striking because those states only performed required certification matches annually. Now, with School Year 2011-2012, all eight southeast states provide direct certification data monthly ensuring all eligible SNAP children receive free breakfast and lunch sooner; and, North Carolina currently provides daily updates to school districts.

The Food and Nutrition Service has the unique responsibility of authorizing and ensuring compliance of all grocery retailers (approximately 230,000 in FY 2011) who redeem SNAP benefits to 45 million participants. The processes used to manage these retailers had been in place for more than 20 years without significant organizational or operational change. To address this matter, Mr. Arnette initiated a southeast pilot for Retailer Operations moving processes from a territorial to regional “shared” model while maintaining excellent customer service. He realigned operations/processes and integrated staff into several centralized hubs where they specialize in providing detailed services to food retailers. Due to specialization, employees’ ability to authorize, reauthorize or process store investigations has dramatically improved and captured staff years for other program operations. For example, in FY 2008 the Southeast Region’s average number of completed retail store authorizations increased to 530 actions annually per staff year as compared to the national average of 377 actions per staff year. In FY 2011, staff now average more than 900 authorization actions. As a result, Mr. Arnette’s vision and business case shaped a framework that enveloped the organizational structure, aligned operational tasks and eliminated duplication within and across regions leading to the Southeast Region pilot being implemented nationally in all seven FNS regions.

Mr. Arnette is well versed on the alarming statistics showing decreasing levels of wellness and the indications that today’s children are the first generation to likely have shorter life-spans than their parents. To help address this issue, in FY 2009 he partnered with the Mississippi Department of Human Services to co-host a Nutrition Summit on state obesity concerns. This unprecedented effort brought together public and private entities which identified old and new state initiatives and potential resources to ameliorate Mississippi’s serious adult and childhood obesity health issue. Additionally, to promote a better understanding of FNS programs and their ability to positively support the state’s wellness matters, Mr. Arnette challenged all to consider ways to leverage FNS programs. Subsequently, the Mississippi Department of Education requested the Region’s assistance in developing criteria for proposed legislation to promote healthy schools and reduce childhood obesity. Therefore, effective July 1, 2010, Mississippi passed two laws that provide financial incentives to newly approved HUSSC schools and training for school administrators, teachers and food service staff on healthy school environments. To further highlight the need for childhood physical activity and good nutrition, he brokered a partnership between the FNS and the 666,000 member United States Tennis Association (USTA) to promote the nation’s Food Guide Pyramid and the Food and Nutrition Service’s “Eat Smart, Play Hard” campaign.

Starting in FY 2005, this Executive actively promoted the Administration’s Healthier US School Challenge (HUSSC) initiative established to recognize schools that create healthy school environments by promoting good nutrition and physical activity. The initiative was later adopted as part of the First Lady’s “Let’s Move” campaign. Mr. Arnette personally engaged with State Superintendents of Education in each state in his region to garner their support for this important initiative. Tremendous results followed. Mr. Arnette’s frontward actions were the catalyst behind the southeast having the first recognized HUSSC schools in the nation. In the program’s maiden year, he led the nation by delivering 49 certified Gold Healthier US Schools and has continued to lead the nation in the number of certified Healthier US Schools. In FY 2011, the southeast approved 247 new HUSSC schools bringing the region’s total to 388 schools; over 23% of the HUSSC schools certified nationally. Through his efforts to influence changes in both the food service and wellness activities in schools, more than 200,000 southeast children benefit daily by having access to healthier food at school with increased levels of physical activity.

Mr. Arnette consistently achieved over 99% efficiency while administering and managing his financial resources. He ensured compliance with all appropriate laws, circulars and regulations. In FY 2009, he incorporated new review procedures to verify that Women, Infants and Children (WIC) accounts were accurately reconciled at the fiscal year closing. The region’s new procedures identified problems in more than one southeast WIC state agency and led FNS to recover $1.3 million from the South Carolina WIC Program and $3.5 million from the Florida WIC Program in FY 2009. The Florida WIC debt was the largest established and collected in the history of FNS. The Region’s review procedures were integrated into the national Financial Management Review Guide now used by all regions.