

**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Administrative Review Branch**

Mama Supermarket,

Appellant,

v.

**Office of Retailer Operations and
Compliance,**

Respondent.

Case Number: C0235285

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), finds that there is sufficient evidence to support the determination by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance to impose a six month disqualification against Mama Supermarket (hereinafter Appellant) from participating as an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

ISSUE

The issue accepted for review is whether the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance took appropriate action, consistent with Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) § 278.6(a), § 278.6(e)(5 and 6), and § 278.6(f)(1) in its administration of the SNAP when it imposed a six month period of disqualification against Appellant.

AUTHORITY

According to 7 U.S.C. § 2023 and the implementing regulations at 7 CFR § 279.1, “A food retailer or wholesale food concern aggrieved by administrative action under § 278.1, § 278.6 or § 278.7 . . . may . . . file a written request for review of the administrative action with FNS.”

CASE CHRONOLOGY

USDA conducted an investigation of the compliance of Appellant with federal SNAP law and regulations during the period January 23, 2021, through March 10, 2021. The investigation determined that personnel at the Appellant firm accepted SNAP benefits in exchange for ineligible merchandise on three separate occasions. All three transactions were deemed clearly violative and warrant a six month disqualification period. The items sold are best described in regulatory terms as common nonfood items such as steel wool pads, dishwashing liquid, laundry

detergent, dryer sheets, toilet tissue, and paper towels. The investigative report indicates that these violative transactions were handled by three different clerks. The report shows that these clerks readily allowed the exchange of SNAP benefits for ineligible items in Exhibits C, D, and F. The clerk in Exhibit E did refuse the exchange of SNAP benefits for ineligible items while the clerk in Exhibit G refused the exchange of SNAP benefits for cash. The firm's EBT terminal was not working in Exhibit A and no ineligible items or cash were attempted to be transacted using SNAP benefits in Exhibit B.

As a result of evidence compiled from this investigation, the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance informed Appellant, in a letter dated May 18, 2021, that the firm was charged with violating the terms and conditions of the SNAP regulations, 7 CFR § 278.2(a). The letter states, in part, that the violations “. . . warrant a disqualification period of six months (Section 278.6(e)(5)). The letter also states that under certain conditions, FNS may impose a civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a disqualification (Section 278.6(f)(1)).”

Appellant responded to the charges in a letter dated May 24, 2021. After giving consideration to the evidence, the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance notified Appellant in a letter dated June 3, 2021, that it determined that violations had occurred at the firm, and that a six month period of disqualification from participating as an authorized firm in SNAP was warranted. This determination letter also states that Appellant's eligibility for a hardship CMP according to the terms of Section 278.6(f)(1) of the SNAP regulations was considered. However, the letter stated “. . . you are not eligible for the CMP because there are other authorized retail stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices.”

By letter postmarked June 10, 2021, Appellant appealed the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance's decision and requested an administrative review of this action. The appeal was granted and implementation of the sanction has been held in abeyance pending completion of this review. No subsequent correspondence was received. In a telephone conversation with this Review Officer on August 19, 2021, store ownership repeated the contentions made in the charge letter reply and also claimed the disqualification would cause financial hardship to the firm.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In an appeal of an adverse action, Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of evidence that the administrative action should be reversed. That means Appellant has the burden of providing relevant evidence that a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to support a conclusion that the argument asserted is more likely to be true than untrue.

CONTROLLING LAW

The controlling law in this matter is contained in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended (7 U.S.C. § 2021), and implemented through regulation under Title 7 CFR Section 278. In particular, Sections 278.6(a) and (e)(5) establish the authority upon which a six month disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern.

7 CFR § 271.2 states that: Eligible foods means any food or food product intended for human consumption except alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and hot food and hot food products prepared for immediate consumption.

7 CFR § 278.2(a) states that: Coupons [SNAP benefits] may be accepted by an authorized retail food store only from eligible households, and only in exchange for eligible food. Further, the citation specifies that coupons may not be accepted in exchange for cash, in payment of interest on loans, or for any other nonfood use.

7 CFR § 278.6(a) states that: FNS may disqualify any authorized retail food store . . . if the firm fails to comply with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, or this part. Such disqualification shall result from a finding of a violation on the basis of evidence that may include facts established through on-site investigations.

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(5) states that: a firm is to be disqualified for six months if it is to be the first sanction for the firm and the evidence shows that personnel of the firm have committed violations such as but not limited to the sale of common nonfood items due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm's ownership or management.

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) states that, “FNS may impose a civil money penalty as a sanction in lieu of disqualification when the firm’s disqualification would cause hardship to SNAP households because there is no other authorized retail food store in the area selling as large a variety of staple food items at comparable prices. FNS may disqualify a store which meets the criteria for a CMP if the store had previously been assigned a sanction. A CMP for hardship to SNAP households may not be imposed in lieu of a permanent disqualification.

APPELLANT’S CONTENTIONS

The following may represent a summary of Appellant’s contentions in this matter; however, in reaching a decision, full attention and consideration has been given to all contentions presented, including any not specifically recapitulated or specifically referenced herein:

- The owners are shocked and sorry for the violations. They have been in business for more than 11 years with no violations and always follow EBT rules carefully;
- During the pandemic the business has lost regular employees and struggles to get good employees. New employees were hired, but are still learning and are receiving proper training;
- The owners discussed the transactions with the employees and there were only three out of seven transactions with nonfood items. In all three, the clerk rejected the nonfood items and then did a second transaction for them when asked by the investigative officer. The clerk did not fully understand the language and thought the EBT card had cash money and it would be OK to process the transaction;
- The owners respects the rules and regulations and follow them for all transactions. They did not intentionally process any transaction and it was due to a misunderstanding and lack of proper knowledge of the clerks due to the pandemic; and,
- The owners request that the decision show the transactions were mistakenly processed

and give the business a chance to survive and continue in business. The owners will make sure to follow the rules and will make sure it never happens again.

Appellant submitted no evidence or other rationales in support of these contentions.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

It is important to clarify for the record that the purpose of this review is to either validate or to invalidate the earlier decision of the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance and is limited to what circumstances were at the basis of the action at the time such action was made. In an appeal of an adverse action, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of evidence that the administrative action should be reversed. That means the Appellant has the burden of providing relevant evidence that a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to support a conclusion that the argument asserted is more likely to be true than untrue. Assertions that the firm has not violated program rules, by themselves and without supporting evidence and rationale, do not constitute valid grounds for dismissal of the current charges of violations or for mitigating their impact. There is no provision in the SNAP regulations for waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment on the basis of corrective actions implemented subsequent to investigative findings of program violations. While store ownership may not have personally conducted the violative transactions, SNAP rules and regulations state that regardless of whom the ownership of a store may utilize to handle store business or their degree of involvement in store operations, that ownership is accountable for the proper training of staff and the monitoring and handling of all SNAP benefit transactions. When store ownership signed the certification page of the SNAP retailer authorization application to become a SNAP retailer and again when it applied for reauthorization as a SNAP retailer, it confirmed it understood and agreed to abide by program rules and regulatory provisions. It also agreed to accept responsibility on behalf of the firm for SNAP violations including those committed by any of the firm's employees, paid or unpaid, new, full-time or part-time. The certification is clear that store ownership understood by signing the document that violations of program rules can result in administrative actions such as fines, sanctions, withdrawal, or disqualification from the SNAP.

The FNS investigative report shows that three employees working at the Appellant firm accepted SNAP benefits for ineligible items on three separate occasions during the investigative period indicating a series of SNAP violations most likely resulting from a lack of training as well as poor or no supervision. The report shows that the nature and scope of the violations under review do violate SNAP regulations, and the transaction amounts cited in the report also match FNS transaction records for the dates in question. There is no regulatory threshold for the dollar value of the ineligible items purchased or for the timeframe in which they were purchased. The acceptance of SNAP benefits for ineligible items is a violation of SNAP rules and regulations. The ineligible items sold were obvious nonfood items and would not readily be confused with eligible edible food items. SNAP regulations explicitly state that FNS shall disqualify a store for a six month period if it is to be the first sanction for the firm, and the evidence shows that personnel of the firm have committed violations such as the sale of common nonfood items in exchange for SNAP benefits due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm's ownership or

management. The applicable regulations do not specify intent as being a required element for a six month disqualification.

SNAP benefits, in general, are only authorized to be used for the purchase of foods for the household to eat as well as seeds and plants which produce food for the household to eat. The common nonfood items purchased are clearly not edible foods and are not plants or seeds, so one has to question the level of training these employees received by store ownership and/or management. The basic concept of “if you can’t eat it, you can’t buy it using SNAP” is not a difficult one for employees to grasp, regardless of their primary language, yet these employees allowed the purchase of ineligible items using SNAP benefits on multiple occasions. Had an effective compliance policy and program been in effect at the firm, it is unlikely that these employees would have made such obvious mistakes. The more likely explanation is that store ownership and/or management failed to properly train and subsequently supervise these employees. Additionally, had store ownership and/or management been supervising these employees through occasionally monitoring them using videotape, if available, or in person, it would have readily noticed that they were allowing the sale of ineligible nonfood items in exchange for SNAP benefits. It also would have been immediately evident to store ownership and/or management that these employees were deficient in their knowledge of SNAP rules and regulations had it periodically spot checked their knowledge and abilities by asking questions about SNAP eligible/ineligible items. Either of these basic supervisory techniques would have provided a no cost method for store ownership and/or management to ensure that store employees were not putting the firm’s SNAP license at risk. These are clear signs of poor or no supervision by store ownership and/or management.

It is highly improbable, based on the willingness of these employees to exchange SNAP benefits for ineligible nonfood items, that the only instances of SNAP violations were those transactions identified as part of the FNS undercover investigation. Common sense dictates that these actions more likely than not represented an ongoing pattern of SNAP violations at the Appellant firm. As previously stated, store ownership is responsible for all SNAP transactions at the firm and therefore a certain minimal level of oversight and training on the part of ownership to ensure employees, especially new employees, are not violating SNAP laws or regulations is expected. It would be unusual and irresponsible for store ownership to not have a program of ongoing supervision of employee performance and conduct by periodically monitoring store transactions, including those involving SNAP, and reviewing daily balance sheets to ensure store employees were not stealing from the firm or conducting other activities that would jeopardize the licenses and income that the firm is dependent upon. Under SNAP regulations, the penalty for allowing the purchase of ineligible nonfood items using SNAP benefits as the result of poor supervision by ownership or management is a six month disqualification. The regulations do allow SNAP retailers to pay a hardship CMP, if eligible, as explained in the next section.

A review of the investigative report shows no errors or discrepancies and a comparison of the dates/times/amounts on the POS and register receipts issued by the Appellant firm to the USDA investigator correspond to the dates/times/amounts provided to FNS by the firm’s EBT processor when it submitted the transactions to FNS for reimbursement. Other evidence provided (photos of the items purchased and detailed witnessed destruction records also support the details provided in the investigative report. While a firm that has previously received warnings of

possible violations or that has been sanctioned before could receive a more severe penalty, SNAP regulations do not provide any grounds for dismissing or reducing penalties for those firms that have not received warnings or previously been sanctioned. The record shows no evidence that the Appellant firm received any prior warnings or has been sanctioned and there is no evidence that the firm's ownership or management intentionally violated SNAP regulations.

Regarding store ownership's claim that the three violative transactions were the result of a lack of knowledge meets the regulatory criteria for a six month disqualification. As previously stated, when store ownership signed the certification page of the SNAP retailer application and reauthorization application, it confirmed it understood and agreed to abide by program rules and regulatory provisions and also agreed to accept responsibility for SNAP violations including those committed by any of the firm's employees, paid or unpaid, new, full-time or part-time. The fact that the three clerks were untrained or improperly trained is not an excuse as store ownership had the option to stop accepting SNAP benefits until trained staff were available or to quickly train the individuals who were helping. It doesn't take long to explain to someone that SNAP can only be used for edible food items or to show them how to identify what benefits are available on an EBT card.

While it is true that the owners have no record of prior SNAP violations, it is noted for the record that the business has a history of WIC program violations that resulted in the firm's disqualification in 2017 for overcharging.

Based on this discussion, the decision by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance to disqualify the firm for a six month period was the appropriate penalty and there is no valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

It is recognized that some degree of economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is disqualified from participation in SNAP. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment on the basis of possible economic hardship to the firm or to ownership resulting from imposition of such penalty. To allow ownership to be excused from an assessed administrative penalty based on purported economic hardship to the firm would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, and the enforcement efforts of the USDA. Furthermore, giving special consideration to economic hardship to the firm would forsake fairness and equity, not only to competing stores and other participating retailers who are complying fully with program regulations, but also to those retailers who have been disqualified from the program in the past for similar violations. Therefore, ownership's contention that the firm may incur economic hardship based on the assessment of an administrative penalty does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

Appellant is not eligible for a trafficking CMP as these only apply in cases of permanent disqualifications. The matter under review is a term disqualification of six months and does not involve trafficking therefore a trafficking CMP cannot be considered under 7 CFR § 278.6.

A hardship CMP as an optional penalty in lieu of a six month disqualification was considered in this case. Such a finding is appropriate only if a store sells a substantial variety of staple food items and its disqualification would create a hardship to SNAP households because there is no other authorized retail food store in the area selling as large a variety of staple food items at comparable prices. FNS records show there are at least 14 comparably sized or larger SNAP retailers located within a 0.5 mile radius of Appellant's location that includes one medium grocery store, two small grocery stores, two combination grocery stores, and nine convenience stores. The three closest convenience stores are all located within one to two blocks and the nearest small grocery store is just over two blocks from Appellant's location while the medium grocery store is approximately nine blocks away. There are many additional larger stores located slightly further away. All of the comparable stores stock adequate varieties of food in all four staple food categories and in perishables as required by FNS.

The nearby stores appear readily accessible to SNAP recipients and offer a variety of staple foods comparable to, or better than, those offered by Appellant. It is acknowledged that some level of inconvenience to SNAP users is inherent in the disqualification from SNAP of any participating food store as the normal shopping pattern of such SNAP benefit holders may be altered. Inconvenience, however, does not rise to the level of hardship required by the regulations.

CONCLUSION

A review of the evidence in this case supports that the program violations at issue did occur as charged and as admitted by the owners. As noted previously, the charges of violations are based on the findings of a formal USDA investigation. All transactions cited in the letter of charges were conducted by a USDA investigator and signed under penalty of perjury. A review of this documentation has yielded no indication of error or discrepancy in any of the reported findings. Rather, the investigative record is specific and accurate with regard to the dates of the violations, the specific ineligible merchandise sold in exchange for SNAP benefits, and in all other critically pertinent detail. Accordingly, the determination by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance to impose a disqualification of six months against the Appellant firm from participating as an authorized retailer in SNAP is sustained. Furthermore, the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance properly determined that Appellant was not eligible for a hardship CMP according to the terms of Section 278.6(f)(1) of the SNAP regulations as there are other authorized retail stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices.

In accordance with the Food and Nutrition Act, and the regulations thereunder, this penalty shall become effective thirty (30) days after receipt of this decision. A new application for SNAP participation may be submitted ten (10) days prior to the expiration of the six month disqualification period. When eligible, Appellant may reapply for SNAP authorization using the application instructions contained on the FNS web site. Questions regarding the application process can be answered by the FNS Retailer Service Center at 877-823-4369.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Applicable rights to a judicial review of this decision are set forth in 7 U.S.C. § 2023 and 7 CFR § 279.7. If a judicial review is desired, the complaint must be filed in the U.S. District Court for the district in which Appellant's owner resides, is engaged in business, or in any court of record of the State having competent jurisdiction. This complaint, naming the United States as the defendant, must be filed within thirty (30) days of receipt of this decision.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, we are releasing this information in a redacted format as appropriate. FNS will protect, to the extent provided by law, personal information that could constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy.

ROBERT T. DEEGAN
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OFFICER

February 15, 2022