

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

Cornerstone Market,

Appellant,

v.

Case Number: C0201023

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the USDA that the record indicates that Cornerstone Market (hereinafter Appellant) committed violations of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). There is sufficient evidence to support a finding that the permanent disqualification from participation as an authorized retailer in the program, as initially imposed by the Retailer Operations Division was appropriate.

ISSUE

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with Title 7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 278 in its administration of the SNAP, when it imposed a permanent disqualification against Appellant.

AUTHORITY

7 U.S.C. § 2023 and the implementing regulations at 7 CFR § 279.1 provides that “[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

The USDA conducted an investigation of the compliance of Appellant with Federal SNAP law and regulations from August 3, 2017 to October 26, 2017. The investigation report documents that personnel at Appellant committed SNAP violations on six (6) out of eight (8) compliance visits. During two (2) compliance visits, store personnel exchanged SNAP benefits for cash. The buying or selling of SNAP benefits for cash or consideration other than eligible food is trafficking as defined under 7 CFR § 271.2.

As a result of evidence compiled from this investigation, the Retailer Operations Division informed the Appellant, in a letter dated January 16, 2018, that it was charged with violating the terms and conditions of the SNAP regulations. The letter stated, in relevant part, that:

Your firm is charged with trafficking, as defined in Section 271.2 of the SNAP regulations. As provided by Section 278.6(e)(1) of the SNAP regulations, the sanction for the trafficking violation(s) ... is permanent disqualification.

The charge letter also stated that:

Under certain conditions, FNS may impose a civil money penalty (CMP) of up to \$59,000.00 in lieu of permanent disqualification of a firm for trafficking. The SNAP regulations, Section 278.6(i), list the criteria that you must meet in order to be considered for a CMP. If you request a CMP, you must meet each of the four criteria listed and provide the documentation as specified within 10 calendar days of your receipt of this letter.

In email correspondence dated February 6, 2018, Appellant replied to the charge letter and generally stated that he had no paperwork in defense of the charges. Appellant gave a corrected address of 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) and stated that he wanted to make sure the investigator went into the right store. Appellant stated that he asked both employees if they were in violation of the FNS standards and they indicated that they were not. Appellant indicated that he trained the employees himself and do not believe that they would engage in the alleged violations. In a facsimile dated February 21, 2018, Appellant provided three utility bills showing the address as that stated above.

After considering the Appellant's reply and the evidence in the case, the Retailer Operations Division issued a determination letter dated June 27, 2018. The determination letter informed the Appellant it was permanently disqualified from the SNAP in accordance with 7 CFR § 278.6(c) and § 278.6(e)(1). The determination letter also stated that the Retailer Operations Division considered the Appellant's eligibility for a trafficking CMP according to the terms of Section 278.6(i) of the SNAP regulations. The Retailer Operations Division determined that the Appellant was not eligible for the trafficking CMP because the Appellant failed to submit sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy and program to prevent violations of the SNAP.

In a letter dated July 3, 2018, the Appellant requested an administrative review of the Retailer Operations Division's determination. The appeal was granted.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In appeals of adverse actions, an appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative actions should be reversed. That means an appellant has the burden of providing relevant evidence which a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to support a conclusion that the matter asserted is more likely to be true than not true.

CONTROLLING LAW

The controlling statute in this matter is contained in the Food & Nutrition Act of 1977, as amended, 7 U.S.C. § 2021 and 278 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). In particular, 7 CFR § 278.6(a) and (e)(1)(i) establish the authority upon which a permanent disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern.

7 U.S.C. § 2021(b)(3)(B) states, *inter alia*: "... a disqualification under subsection (a) shall be ... permanent upon ... the first occasion or any subsequent occasion of a disqualification based on the purchase of coupons or trafficking in coupons or authorization cards by a retail food store or wholesale food concern or a finding of the unauthorized redemption, use, transfer, acquisition, alteration, or possession of EBT cards ..."

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1)(i) states: "FNS shall disqualify a firm permanently if personnel of the firm have trafficked as defined in § 271.2."

7 CFR § 271.2 states, *inter alia*: "**Trafficking** means "the buying, selling, stealing, or otherwise effecting an exchange of SNAP benefits issued and accessed via Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, card numbers and personal identification numbers (PINs), or by manual voucher and signature, for cash or consideration other than eligible food, either directly, indirectly, in complicity or collusion with others, or acting alone;..."

7 CFR § 278.6(a) states, *inter alia*: "FNS may disqualify any authorized retail food store... if the firm fails to comply with the Food and Nutrition Act of 1977, 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(f)(1) states, *inter alia*: "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... A civil money penalty for hardship to [SNAP] households may not be imposed in lieu of a permanent disqualification."

7 CFR § 278.6(b)(2)(ii) states, *inter alia*: "Firms that request consideration of a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking shall have the opportunity to submit to FNS information and evidence ... that establishes the firm's eligibility for a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification in accordance with the criteria included in § 278.6(i). This information and evidence shall be submitted within 10 days, as specified in § 278.6(b)(1)."

7 CFR § 278.6(i) states, *inter alia*: "FNS may impose a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking ... if the firm timely submits to FNS substantial evidence which demonstrates that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy and program to prevent violations of the Program."

SUMMARY OF THE CHARGES

During an investigation from August 3, 2017 to October 26, 2017, the USDA conducted eight (8) compliance visits at Appellant. A report of the investigation was provided to the Appellant as an attachment to the charge letter dated January 16, 2018. The investigation report documents that, SNAP violations were committed during six (6) of the eight (8) compliance visits. During two (2) of the compliance visits, store personnel committed a trafficking violation by exchanging SNAP benefits for cash.

APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

The Appellant made the following summarized contentions in its request for administrative review, in relevant part:

- I would never do this myself and those people I hired through a temp agency.
- If I lose my ability to accept EBT I will have to go out of business.

The preceding may represent only a brief summary of the Appellant's contentions presented in this matter. Please be assured, however, in reaching a decision, full attention was given to all contentions presented, including any not specifically recapitulated or specifically referenced herein.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

With regards to Appellant's contentions, they cannot be accepted as a valid basis for dismissing any of the charges, or for mitigating the impact of those charges. As owner of the store, Appellant is liable for all violative transactions handled by store personnel. Regardless of whom the ownership of a store may utilize to handle store business, whether employee or family member helping out, full-time, part-time, paid or unpaid, ownership is accountable for the proper handling of SNAP benefit transactions. To allow store ownership to disclaim accountability for the acts of persons whom the ownership chooses to utilize to handle store business would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

The charges of violations are based on the findings of a formal Department of Agriculture investigation; all transactions cited were conducted under the direct supervision of a Department Investigator. All such transactions are fully documented and a review of this documentation has yielded no indication of substantial error or discrepancy in the reported findings; the investigative record is specific and thorough with regard to the dates and other specifics of the violations and in all other critically pertinent detail.

The Appellant contends that a permanent disqualification from the SNAP will have an adverse and negative impact on the firm. With regard to this contention, it is recognized that some degree of economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is disqualified from participation in the SNAP. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for a waiver

or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment on the basis of possible economic hardship to either the ownership personally or the firm resulting from the imposition of such penalty. To allow store ownership to be excused from assessed administrative penalties based on a purported economic hardship would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

Appellant contends that the investigator may have gone into the wrong store since the address listed on FNS correspondence is incorrect. The record reflects that the investigator verified the location of the store during the investigation and that the Appellant moved the store two doors down prior to the investigation. It was verified that the store address is 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C), which is the same address that appears on the EBT receipts received during the investigation.

CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

The Appellant did not timely request consideration for a trafficking CMP in lieu of a permanent disqualification under 7 CFR 278.6(i) even though it was informed of the right to do so in the charge letter. Even if a timely request had been submitted, the Appellant would likely not have been eligible for a trafficking CMP in lieu of disqualification because there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy to prevent SNAP violations. Therefore, the Retailer Operations Division's decision not to impose a trafficking CMP in lieu of disqualification is sustained as appropriate pursuant to 7 CFR § 278.6(i).

CONCLUSION

As previously stated, 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1)(i) reads, in part, "FNS shall disqualify a firm permanently if personnel of the firm have trafficked as defined in § 271.2." Trafficking is defined, in part, in 7 CFR § 271.2, as "the buying or selling of SNAP benefits for cash or consideration other than eligible food." The law and regulations do not provide for a lesser period of disqualification for this violation.

Based on a review of the evidence in this case, there is no question that program violations did occur during a USDA investigation. All transactions cited in the letter of charges were conducted or supervised by a USDA Investigator and all are thoroughly documented. 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, including the exchange of SNAP benefits for cash, and in all other critically pertinent details. The decision to impose a permanent disqualification against Cornerstone Market is sustained.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Your attention is called to Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, (7 U.S.C. § 2023) and to Title 7, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 279.7 (7 CFR § 279.7) with respect to your right to a judicial review of this determination. Please note that if a judicial

review is desired, the Complaint, naming the United States as the defendant, must be filed in the U.S. District Court for the district in which you reside or are engaged in business, or in any court of record of the State having competent jurisdiction. If any Complaint is filed, it must be filed within thirty (30) days of receipt of this Decision.

Under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 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.

Monique Brooks
Administrative Review Officer

October 25, 2018