

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

**Vargas Grocery,**

**Appellant,**

**V.**

**Case Number: C0224230**

**Retailer Operations Division,**

**Respondent.**

**FINAL AGENCY DECISION**

It is the decision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), that there is sufficient evidence to support a finding that the denial of a hardship civil money penalty, in lieu of a three (3) year disqualification from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as a result of Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Program violations, was properly rendered by the Retailer Operations Division against Vargas Grocery (hereinafter Appellant).

**ISSUE**

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8) in its administration of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) when it denied assessing a civil money penalty in lieu of a three (3) year disqualification against Appellant on January 14, 2020.

**AUTHORITY**

7 U.S.C. § 2023 and the implementing regulations at 7 CFR § 279.1 provide 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**

FNS was advised by the Pennsylvania WIC State Agency in email correspondence dated December 3, 2019, that Appellant was being disqualified from the WIC Program for three (3) years identified as the period starting April 7, 2019, and that Appellant failed to file an appeal. The correspondence was appended with a Pennsylvania WIC State Agency letter dated March 8, 2019, addressed to Appellant and that included information on violations committed against the terms and conditions contained in the Vendor Agreement. Those violations included ones

pursuant to 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8)(i)(A) “A pattern of claiming reimbursement for the sale of an amount of specific food items for a specific period.”

In a letter dated December 18, 2019, the Retailer Operations Division informed ownership of the agency’s intention to disqualify Appellant from participation in the SNAP for a period of three (3) years as a reciprocal administrative action on the basis of the store’s disqualification from the WIC Program. The record reflects that Appellant failed to respond to the charge letter.

Retailer Operations Division considered Appellant’s non response to the charge letter and the facts of the case, and in correspondence dated January 14, 2020, notified Appellant that it was disqualified from the SNAP. The Determination letter stated in relevant part:

*“You were informed of a possible reciprocal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) disqualification as a result of the WIC disqualification action. All opportunities for appeal of the WIC State agency action have been exhausted or have expired. Therefore, in accordance with Section 278.6(e)(8)(iii) of the SNAP regulations, your firm shall be disqualified from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for a period of 3 years. This determination is final and is not subject to administrative review.*

*We considered your eligibility for a hardship civil money penalty (CMP) according to the terms of Section 278.6(f)(1) of the SNAP regulations. We have determined that you are not eligible for a CMP because there are other authorized retail stores in the area selling a variety of staple foods at comparable prices”*

## **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 and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, 7 U.S.C. § 2023 and Section 278 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

Section 12 [7 U.S.C § 2021] (a)(1) states, in part, “An approved retail food store or wholesale food concern that violates a provision of this Act or a regulation under this Act may be: (A) disqualified for a specific period of time from further participation in the supplemental nutrition assistance program; (B) assessed a civil penalty of up to \$100,000 for each violation; or (C) both.”

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8) states, in part, FNS shall disqualify from the Food Stamp Program any firm which is disqualified from the WIC program.”

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8)(iii)(A) states, in part, that such a disqualification: "...shall be for the same length of time as the WIC disqualification."

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8)(iii)(C) states, in part, that such a disqualification: "Shall not be subject to administrative or judicial review under the Food Stamp Program."

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) states, in part, "FNS may impose a civil money penalty as a sanction in lieu of disqualification when the firm subject to a disqualification is selling a substantial variety of staple food items, and the firm's disqualification would cause hardship to food stamp 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."

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(4)(i) states, in part, "If the applicant firm has been sanctioned for violations of this part, by withdrawal or disqualification for a period of more than six months, or by a civil money penalty in lieu of a disqualification period of more than six months, or if the applicant firm has been previously sanctioned for violations and incurs a subsequent sanction, regardless of the disqualification period, FNS shall, as a condition of future authorization, require the applicant to present a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit..."

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(4)(D) states, in part, "The collateral bond of irrevocable letter of credit must have a face value of \$1,000 or an amount equal to ten percent of the average monthly SNAP redemption volume of the applicant firm for the immediate twelve months prior to the effective date of the most recent sanction which necessitated the collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit, whichever amount is greater."

### **APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS**

In correspondence postmarked January 16, 2020, Appellant made the following summarized contentions in response to the Retailer Operations Division determination that it was not eligible for a CMP in lieu of disqualification, in relevant part:

1. Kindly request that you consider my store for the hardship civil money penalty rather than the disqualification for 3 years.
2. The disqualification of my business would be detrimental for our community.
3. The disqualification will cause monetary hardship.
4. I am committed to my community and I assure you that if you give me this opportunity, I will make sure it will be compliant to the law in all areas and all the time.

The preceding may represent only a brief 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.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The record shows that Appellant was informed in the FNS letter of charges dated December 18, 2019, as well as in the FNS letter of determination dated January 14, 2020, that the determination to disqualify Appellant from the SNAP, on the basis of the WIC Program disqualification, is not subject to administrative review. Notwithstanding any new or repeated arguments the WIC disqualification is a matter decided within the Wisconsin WIC State Agency and the basis for that decision is not a consideration in the instant case per SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(8)(iii)(C); rather the immediate appeal is focused strictly on the firm's eligibility for a hardship civil money penalty.

It is important to clarify that Appellant was duly notified that the WIC Program disqualification may result in a reciprocal SNAP authorization disqualification in the notice from the Pennsylvania WIC State Agency dated March 8, 2019. Page 3, Paragraph 5, of the WIC disqualification notice dated March 8, 2019 states "As per C.F.R. § 246.18b (1) of the WIC regulations, this disqualification from the WIC Program may result in disqualification as a retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Such disqualification is not subject to administrative or judicial review under SNAP."

## CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

With regard to Appellant's contentions, Retailer Operations Division has rendered a finding pursuant to 7 CFR § 278.6(f) that it would not be appropriate to impose a CMP in lieu of a period of disqualification because of its determination that Appellant is not the only authorized retail food store in the area "selling as large a variety of staple food items at comparable prices."

A comparison of the USDA store visit of Appellant's store to that of the other SNAP authorized retailers does not show that Appellant had a superior variety, quantity, and quality of food inventories and that Appellant does not offer any specialty or ethnic foods not found at the other nearby SNAP authorized retailers. There also was nothing to indicate that Appellant had lower food prices or that a disqualification would cause hardship to SNAP households.

The imposition of a CMP in lieu of disqualification 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. The regulations do not refer to the availability of WIC vendors but rather to the availability of SNAP authorized retailers. The SNAP regulations do not define hardship as inconvenience, but specifically defines it as a condition that results because "there is no other authorized retail food store in the area selling as large a variety of staple food items at comparable prices."

In this case, the Retailer Operations Division has noted Appellant as a convenience store, as defined in accordance with SNAP regulations, and is located in an area where 46 alternative SNAP authorized firms all located within a one (1) mile radius. The alternative SNAP authorized firms include small grocery stores, medium grocery stores, supermarkets and a number of additional convenience stores and that the alternative SNAP authorized firms are

identified as selling as large a variety or staple food items at prices comparable or better than those of Appellants'. Therefore, by definition, there is no hardship that will result as there is no lack of comparable stores in the area.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion herein, the decision to deny the imposition of a hardship CMP in lieu of a three (3) year SNAP disqualification against Vargas Grocery is sustained.

In accordance with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, and the SNAP regulations, the period of disqualification shall become affective 30 days after receipt of this letter. A new application for participation may be submitted by the firm 10 days prior to the expiration of this three (3) year period. In accordance with 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(4), at the time of any such new application for program participation, the firm would be advised by the office receiving such an application of the necessity, as a store previously sanctioned for program violations, also to post a collateral bond or irrevocable letter of credit as a condition for once more being authorized to participate in the program.

### **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

May 27, 2020