

**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Administrative Review Branch
Alexandria, VA 22302**

One Stop Shoppe,

Appellant,

v.

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

Case Number: C0185983

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that the record indicates that One Stop Shoppe (Appellant) committed violations of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and that there is sufficient evidence to support a six month disqualification from the SNAP as initially imposed by the Retailer Operations Division (Retailer Operations).

ISSUE

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

AUTHORITY

7 U.S.C. § 2023 and its 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

The USDA conducted an investigation of the compliance of Appellant with federal SNAP law and regulations during the period of March 30, 2016 through June 22, 2016. The investigative report documented that personnel at Appellant accepted SNAP benefits in exchange for ineligible merchandise on multiple separate occasions that warrant a six month disqualification period. The items sold are best described in regulatory terms as common nonfood items.

As a result of evidence compiled during this investigation, by letter dated February 8, 2017, Retailer Operations charged the owners with violating the terms and conditions of the SNAP

regulations at 7 CFR § 278.2(a) and noted misuse of SNAP benefits in Exhibits A, B, C, D, and E that warrants a disqualification as a SNAP retail food store for a period of six months. The letter also states that under certain conditions, FNS may impose a civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a disqualification.

Ownership replied to the Charge letter on February 16, 2017 and March 6, 2017. Retailer Operations considered the replies and informed the owners by Determination letter dated March 27, 2017, that the violations cited in the Charge letter occurred at the firm and that a six month period of disqualification was warranted. The letter also stated that eligibility for a hardship CMP was not applicable as there are other authorized retail food stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices.

By undated letter postmarked April 3, 2017, one owner appealed Retailer Operations' determination and requested administrative review of this action. The appeal was granted by letter dated April 10, 2017. One owner submitted another letter by facsimile and email, both sent on April 15, 2017.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In an appeal of an adverse action, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative action should be reversed. That means the 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 argument asserted is more likely to be true than not true.

CONTROLLING LAW AND REGULATIONS

The controlling statute in this matter is contained in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, 7 U.S.C. § 2021 and § 278 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). 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.

Section 278.2(a) states "Coupons may be accepted by an authorized retail food store only from eligible households or the households' authorized representative, and only in exchange for eligible food."

Section 278.6(e)(5) of the SNAP regulations states, in part, 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(a) states, "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, inconsistent redemption data, evidence obtained through a transaction report under an electronic benefit transfer system..."

In addition, 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) provides for civil money penalty (CMP) assessments in lieu of disqualification in cases where disqualification would cause “hardship” to SNAP benefit households because of the unavailability of a comparable participating food store in the area to meet their shopping needs. It reads, in part, “FNS may impose a civil money penalty as a sanction in lieu of disqualification when ... the firm’s disqualification would cause hardship to SNAP benefit 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.”

SUMMARY OF THE CHARGES

The USDA conducted five compliance visits at Appellant. A report of the investigation was provided to the Appellant as an attachment to the Charge letter. The investigative report included Exhibits A through E which provide full details on the results of each compliance visit. The investigation report documents that SNAP violations were recorded during multiple store visits, and the violations warrant a six month disqualification. The violations involved the sale of the following nonfood items: plastic cutlery, plastic bowls and plastic forks for SNAP benefits in violation of 7 CFR § 278.2(a).

APPELLANT’S CONTENTIONS

Consideration of all contentions was made whether recapitulated here or not. The owner advanced the following contentions:

- I understand that the violation is very serious and it has occurred before.
- I request that the business not be suspended from the SNAP and am ready to pay for any penalty that is given.
- The business is located in a highly populated area and the next convenience store is farther away.
- The store is located relatively close to an apartment complex and many homes.
- By suspending this location from the SNAP program, the population nearby would be negatively affected.
- The supermarket is 1.8 miles from my location, see Google map attached.
- It was a mistake made by the employee.
- I had a conflict occur at my business.
- The employee accused of the violation will be fired.
- I will ensure any new employee will be given strict and proper training on SNAP.
- I am ready to pay any fine. Do not suspend my business.

The owner provided a copy of a one page Google map.

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 determination made by Retailer Operations. This review is limited to what circumstances were at the basis of Retailer Operations' determination at the time such action was taken. Upon review, the evidence supports that Appellant established a record of selling non-food items as defined by Section 271.2 of the regulations, on multiple occasions as noted in the Exhibits furnished with the Charge letter which warrant a disqualification period of six months. 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(5) specifies that FNS shall "disqualify the firm 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 nonfood items due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm's ownership or management." (emphasis added) Three violations are considered evidence of carelessness. Therefore, the violations in this case are not too limited to warrant a disqualification.

Ownership signed the FNS retailer application to become a SNAP authorized retailer, which included a certification and confirmation that ownership would "accept responsibility on behalf of the firm for violations of the SNAP regulations, including those committed by any of the firm's employees, paid or unpaid, new, full-time or part-time." By signing this document ownership confirmed that "I am aware that violations of program rules can result in administrative actions such as fines, sanctions, withdrawal or disqualification from Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; "It is my responsibility to ensure that the training materials are reviewed by all firm owners and all employees...;" "I accept responsibility on behalf of the firm for violations of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program regulations, including those committed by any of the firm employees."

Regardless of whom the owner(s) of a store may utilize to handle store business, the owner(s) is accountable for the proper handling of SNAP benefit transactions. The regulations establish that an authorized food store may be disqualified from participating in SNAP when the store fails to comply with the Act or regulations because of the wrongful conduct of an owner, manager, or someone acting on their behalf. To allow store ownership to disclaim accountability for the acts of persons whom the ownership chooses to utilize to handle Appellant's business would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

The owner contends that a SNAP disqualification will have a negative financial impact on his business. It is recognized that some degree of economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is disqualified from participation in SNAP. 7 U.S.C. 2018 (b)(7)(e). 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 and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

There are no provisions in the SNAP regulations for waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment on the basis of corrective actions to be implemented subsequent to findings of program violations. Therefore, the owner's contentions that future corrective action of

possible new employee SNAP training, and the possible termination of an employee, does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the current charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

Retailer Operations rendered a finding that it was not appropriate to impose a CMP in lieu of a six month period of disqualification in the determination letter, which states, “We have determined that 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.”

The record under review lists other authorized stores within a nearby radius of Appellant that stock a variety of comparable staple foods and have comparable prices. Comparable stores are not limited to supermarkets as in this matter Appellant is a convenience store and comparable stores would include other convenience stores as well as authorized groceries in the area. Thus, while it may be inconvenient for some recipients to transact SNAP benefits at other nearby authorized stores, the evidence does not support that it will cause hardship for SNAP recipients if Appellant is disqualified.

CONCLUSION

Based on a review of the evidence, the record indicates that the program violations at issue did occur at Appellant. The charges of violations are based on the findings of a formal USDA investigation. The investigative record is specific, thorough, and fully documented 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.

A review of the evidence in this case confirms that Retailer Operations’ initial determination to impose a six month disqualification in lieu of a CMP was correct. The record documents that Retailer Operations properly considered Appellant’s eligibility for a hardship CMP according to the terms of Section 278.6(f)(1) of the SNAP regulations. Given the evidence under review, the CMP was appropriately denied. Therefore, the six month disqualification of Appellant from participating as an authorized retailer in the SNAP is sustained.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

In accordance with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, and the regulations there under, this penalty shall become effective thirty (30) days after receipt of this letter. A new application for participation in the SNAP may be submitted ten (10) days prior to the expiration of the six month period of disqualification. Please contact the Retailer Center at 877-823-4369 with any questions regarding the SNAP application process.

Your attention is called to Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. § 2023) and to Section 279.7 of the Regulations (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 the owners reside or are engaged in business, or in any court of record of the State having competent jurisdiction.

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.

M. Viens
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OFFICER

May 8, 2017