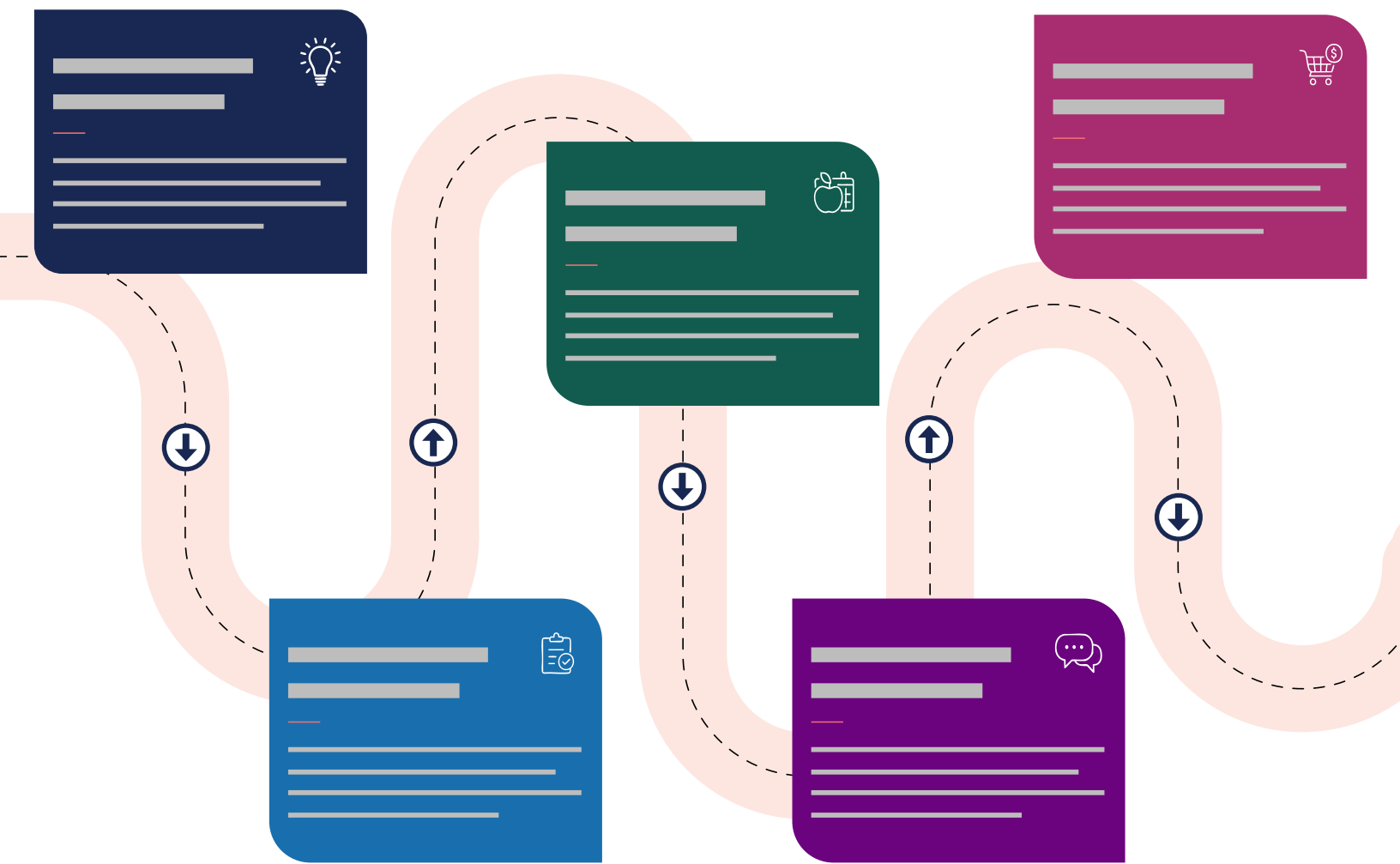


Advancing Health Equity to Achieve Diversity and Inclusion in WIC (AHEAD) 3.0: Enhancing Equity throughout the WIC Participant Journey

Journey Map Toolkit



Participating State WIC Agencies and Indian Tribal Organizations: Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Isleta Pueblo, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wichita, Caddo & Delaware, and Wisconsin.



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Background

The National WIC Association (NWA) is the nonprofit voice for the 12,000 public health nutrition service provider agencies that support over 6.8 million mothers, babies, and young children through WIC. NWA provides education, guidance, and support to WIC staff, driving innovation and advocacy to strengthen WIC as we work toward a nation of healthier families. For more information, visit www.nwica.org.

Since 2019, NWA has led the Advancing Health Equity to Achieve Diversity and Inclusion (AHEAD) initiatives to better understand and improve the WIC participant experience. [AHEAD in WIC](#) established a foundation for integrating health equity into WIC services, practice, policy, and research. [AHEAD 2.0: Strengthening and Diversifying WIC Workforce](#) built off the framework developed in AHEAD in WIC and began NWA's work to support the WIC workforce. The third iteration of the project, [AHEAD 3.0: Enhancing Equity throughout the WIC Participant Journey](#), aims to identify and address barriers to participation, particularly for Black, Brown, and Indigenous families.

The AHEAD 3.0 [Journey Map](#) and accompanying [Report](#) highlight participant experiences across six phases of the WIC journey: WIC awareness; application and enrollment; nutrition education and appointments; critical communication; shopping with WIC benefits; and recertification and retention. Findings show that structural barriers, including language access, cultural misalignment, and logistical constraints, continue to limit equitable full participation. However, when services are accessible, culturally grounded, and delivered with empathy, participants feel respected, valued, and empowered.

This toolkit is designed to help WIC agencies translate insights into actionable state-specific improvements. By using findings from the 2025 Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey and the AHEAD 3.0 framework, agencies can develop journey maps to improve service delivery and advance equity.



What is a Journey Map?

A journey map is a visual representation of how participants experience a program or service over time. It captures key steps in the participant experience, along with their needs, emotions, and challenges at each stage.

The WIC Participant Journey: Enhancing Equity Throughout the WIC Participant Journey

Project Background:

Through the *Advancing Health Equity to Achieve Diversity and Inclusion in WIC (AHEAD) 3.0: Enhancing Equity throughout the WIC Participant Journey* project, the National WIC Association (NWA) aims to identify and address barriers to WIC participation, particularly for Black, Brown, and Indigenous families. In partnership with Urban Metrics Consultants (UMC), the project team conducted a literature review, facilitated WIC participant focus groups across racial and ethnic groups, and incorporated stakeholder feedback and findings from a national participant survey to better understand what works well in WIC and where challenges persist. This work culminated in the creation of a comprehensive journey map to understand participant experiences and areas for improvement in enrollment, participation, service delivery, and retention. To explore the full findings, please refer to the [Journey Map Report](#).

Key Insights:

- WIC performs best when services are relationship-centered and culturally responsive. Tribal WIC models and bilingual staffing demonstrate how intentional cultural and linguistic integration makes enrollment and education significantly more accessible.
- Persistent barriers like paperwork, limited hours and locations, and inconsistent language access deprive WIC participants of dignity and limit benefit use.
- Digital tools (i.e., the WIC app, eWIC card, and remote appointments) reduce burden, but only when features like document upload, product clarity, and reminders are reliable and consistent across the program.
- The shopping environment is a vital touchpoint where clear signage, staff training, and store compatibility can directly reduce stigma and support full redemption of benefits.
- Because families may enter, exit, and re-enter WIC at different life stages, every touchpoint must be welcoming, consistent, and accessible no matter when a family engages.

Legend

Facilitator

Barrier

Equity Lens Key

AA/PI Asian American/Pacific Islander
W/CA White/Caucasian American
A/AA African/African American
NA Native American
L/HA Latinx/Hispanic American



Journey maps are grounded in real data, such as surveys, interviews, and observations, and are designed to reflect lived experiences rather than assumptions. When used effectively, they help agencies:

- Build empathy with participants
- Identify barriers and facilitators
- Improve program design and delivery
- Prioritize participant-centered solutions

Journey maps can focus on the full WIC experience or a specific component, such as enrollment, shopping, or breastfeeding support.



Core Components of a Journey Map

- **Phases or Stages:** Key stages in the participant experience
- **Participant Perspectives:** Emotions, needs, and motivations
- **Facilitators and Barriers:** What helps or hinders participation
- **Key Takeaways:** Opportunities for improvement
- **Visual Design:** Clear, accessible presentation using simple language and visuals

Key Findings from AHEAD 3.0

Participant experiences vary widely based on identity, geography, and access to resources. The journey is not linear, and different groups encounter different barriers and supports.



WIC Awareness: Participants most often learned about WIC through healthcare providers and family networks. However, some communities experience limited awareness of WIC due to a lack of culturally relevant outreach.

Implication for Agencies: Invest in trusted messengers and culturally representative outreach strategies. Increase WIC visibility at cultural events, community spaces, healthcare settings, and high-traffic neighborhood locations.





Application and Enrollment: Enrollment is generally straightforward, but barriers include transportation, language access, and limited staff representation.

Implication for Agencies: Expand flexible enrollment options and strengthen culturally responsive, relationship-based approaches. Improve language access and staff representation by hiring bilingual/bicultural staff, providing interpretation services, and reflecting the communities served.



Nutrition Education and Appointments: Participants valued nutrition education and breastfeeding support, but reported gaps in cultural relevance and dietary alignment.

Implication for Agencies: Adapt services to reflect diverse cultural food practices and participant preferences. Consider offering nutrition education that aligns with traditional diets and provides culturally responsive counseling and materials.



Critical Communication: Clear and proactive communication supports engagement. However, inconsistent experiences, including language barriers and perceived bias, can undermine trust.

Implication for Agencies: Prioritize inclusive, accessible, and consistent communication strategies. Strengthen staff training and expand multilingual, culturally responsive messaging to build trust.



Shopping with WIC Benefits: Mobile apps improve dignity and ease of use, but challenges remain with product availability, store signage, and stigma at checkout.

Implication for Agencies: Strengthen retailer partnerships and improve the in-store experience by providing tools to train cashiers on WIC procedures and participant-centered service.



Recertification and Retention: Participants appreciate flexible options such as phone appointments and online uploads. Continued engagement depends on responsive staff and system coordination.

Implication for Agencies: Maintain flexible service delivery and improve integration across benefit programs. Use reminders, streamline processes, and coordinate across programs to support timely recertification and retention.



Centering Health Equity and Belonging

Journey mapping is most effective when grounded in a health equity framework. This means intentionally designing processes that reflect the experiences of diverse participants and addressing systemic barriers.

Belonging is both a feeling and a practice. In the context of WIC, it means ensuring participants feel respected, represented, and supported at every stage of their journey.

Applying an Equity Lens

- Engage diverse participant groups in research and validation of findings
- Use data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, language, and geography
- Incorporate participant quotes to elevate lived experiences
- Co-create solutions with participants when possible



In Practice: This may include conducting listening sessions with specific communities to gather input, engaging diverse participant groups early and throughout research to validate findings, sharing participant quotes in reports and presentations to highlight lived experiences, and adapting services based on cultural preferences. Your agency should examine how to create research spaces that are welcoming, nonjudgmental, and dignified, where participants feel safe sharing their WIC journey.



These practices can help foster a sense of belonging in WIC by ensuring participants see their identities, cultures, and lived experiences reflected in how services are designed, delivered, and communicated.





Using the 2025 Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey Data for Journey Mapping

The [2025 Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey](#) provides valuable insights into participant experiences.

Agencies can use the Multi-State Survey data to:

- Identify trends in participant satisfaction across groups
- Understand differences in experiences by population
- Combine quantitative data with participant quotes
- Map findings to specific journey phases
- Track changes over time



How to Develop a Journey Map

The following steps outline how agencies can translate survey findings into a journey map. Before developing your journey map, you will need your State Agency Report and any open-ended responses from the Participant Survey.

Step 1: Define Your Focus and Pull Key Metrics

- **Define the purpose of the journey map and select the specific experience or program area to map.**



Tip: Be specific. A focused journey map yields more actionable insights.

- **Consider which phases of the participant journey align with the selected purpose and program area.**



Tip: Use NWA's six WIC journey phases as a guiding framework, if helpful.

- **Select the key metrics from the survey that will be most relevant to the purpose and program area.**
 - Review the following tables in the State Agency Report:
 - *Table 2a and 2b.* Experiences with WIC Enrollment or Recertification Documentation
 - *Table 3a and 3b.* Experiences with Appointments, Nutrition Education, Breastfeeding Support, and Other WIC Interactions
 - *Table 5a and 5b.* Experiences Shopping for WIC Foods
 - *Table 6a and 6b.* Use of WIC Card and WIC App
 - *Table 7a and 7b.* Perceptions of Cash Value Benefit (CVB) for Fruits and Vegetables
 - *Table 8a and 8b.* Perceptions of WIC Food Package



Tip: Agencies do not need to highlight all findings. Focus on what is most relevant to the story and journey being mapped.

Step 2: Analyze Data by Population of Interest

- **Identify the participant group (e.g., new enrollees, rural participants, Spanish-speaking families, other racial/ethnic communities).**
 - Review the following tables in the State Agency Report:
 - *Table 1a and 1b. Survey Participant Characteristics*
- **Identify key themes, facilitators, and barriers.**
 - Look across responses to identify patterns that appear consistently within and across participant groups. Themes should reflect common experiences, perceptions, or challenges described by participants.



- **Consider the following:**

- How does your agency currently implement WIC services, and how might this differ across locations?
- What specific experiences support participants in feeling respected, welcomed, and able to fully participate in WIC?
- What experiences or barriers may hinder access, trust, or continued participation?
- Which participant groups appear to have the most positive experiences? What practices contribute to those experiences?



- Review the following tables in the State Agency Report:
 - *Table 4a and 4b. Perceptions of WIC's Efforts to Support Fairness and Belonging*
 - *These tables support understanding key themes around whether participants feel cultural alignment with WIC services.*
- **Assess gaps and collect additional data, if needed. Validate findings with participants when possible.**
- **Look for patterns across responses, including differences by race, ethnicity, language, or geography.**



Step 3: Center Lived-Experiences through Quotes

- Incorporate qualitative responses through participant quotes.

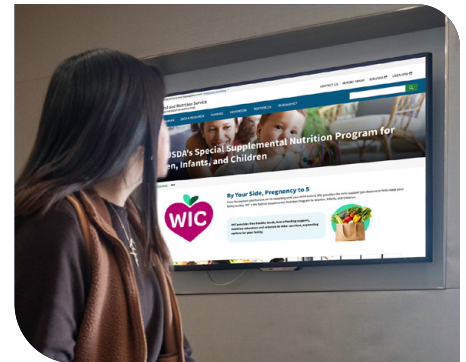


Tip: Using both the Agency State Report and open-ended survey responses, your agency can highlight meaningful quotes that reflect participant experiences.

- Select quotes that illustrate key barriers, facilitators, or emotional experiences.

Step 4: Build the Journey Map

- Using the journey map template, organize findings into:
 - Phases or stages of the participant experience
 - Participant perspectives
 - Facilitators and barriers
 - Key takeaways



Example: Low satisfaction with appointment scheduling may map to a barrier in the “Appointments” phase, supported by participant quotes describing long wait times.



Tip: Use clear language, visuals, and quotes to make the map accessible and compelling.

Download the [Journey Map Template here.](#)

Step 5: Take Action

- Use the journey map to inform program improvements
- Integrate findings into staff training and policy updates
- Assign ownership for implementation
- Revisit and update the map regularly as new data becomes available



Using and Sharing Your Journey Map

Journey maps are valuable tools for both internal and external audiences. Once completed, journey maps should be used intentionally to inform practice, strengthen partnerships, and share across communities.

Internal Use

- Inform quality-improvement efforts
- Support staff onboarding and training
- Align teams around participant-centered goals

External Use

- Share with healthcare providers and community partners
- Strengthen referral pathways and partnerships
- Communicate participant needs and experiences

Field-Wide Sharing

- Present at conferences and webinars
- Contribute to peer learning across states

Conclusion

This toolkit provides a pathway from insight to action. By using journey maps, WIC agencies can better understand participant experiences, address barriers, and design more equitable, responsive services.

