

## Summary: State and Local WIC Agency Concerns with Reopening Clinics during COVID-19

---

To provide guidance on the reopening of WIC clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic and assist WIC program coordinators, managers, dietitians, breastfeeding coordinators and the rest of staffs supporting the reopening, the National WIC Association (NWA) decided to hold a webinar “Preparing for Reopening: Considerations for Adjusting WIC Clinic Operations throughout COVID-19” on May 19, 2020, to share information. A survey was sent out to registrants before the webinar to collect concerns on reopening-related issues, so that the contents of the webinar were made relevant and instructive to practitioners.

An unexpected amount of responses (475 concerns) were collected from the survey, indicating an urgent need of providing detailed guidelines for local WIC clinics to ensure a safe reopening while maintaining normal services and caseloads. To better understand the concerns regarding reopening procedures, this brief summarized and categorized the concerns submitted by practitioners into the following five sections:

### *About Participants:*

WIC plays a crucial role in improving lifetime health, and a lot of concerns are raised upon the safety and feasibility of bringing participants back to WIC clinics during the pandemic. It is hard to make participants feel safe about coming into WIC clinics in communities affected by COVID-19, and preference of remote services has been gradually established during the implementation of the waiver; for those who would like to come to a clinic setting, they might put others at risk by dishonestly reporting recent illness or contact with COVID-19 and ignoring safety measures. Specific concerns about participants include:

- Participants don’t feel safe coming to a clinic setting, leading to:
  - Missing appointments
  - Losing face-to-face interactions with staff
  - Decreased caseload
  - Losing out on benefits
- Participants coming to clinics might be infected and put others at risk, because:
  - Participants may not be forthright reporting recent illness or contact with COVID-19
  - Asymptomatic carriers
  - Participants who do not take the pandemic seriously and therefore do not follow safety measures
- Transportation may be an issue for participants, including hesitation around using public transportation
- Many participants will want to continue phone visits which are safer and easier
- It will be difficult for participants to only bring the child(ren) that need to be at the appointments and exclude other family members/arrange for child care
- It will be difficult to earn participants’ trust and encourage them to return to clinics

### *About Children:*

Young children may be particularly vulnerable to the pandemic, and strict safety measures are required when they come into WIC clinics. However, children under 2 years old are not advised to wear masks, and WIC clinics have reported concern about the unique challenges of enforcing social-distancing, sanitation, and other safety procedures with toddlers/young children. Specific concerns about children include:

- New emerging information on children and COVID-19/Kawasaki syndrome
- Children lick/mouth items, and staff should be careful what sanitizer is used to ensure safety of children
- Children under 2 are not advised to wear masks, which is unsafe for themselves, other participants, and staff
- It will be difficult to enforce social distancing with children who like to run around and climb on objects and people.

### *About Clinic Operation:*

WIC providers are already experiencing the impacts of COVID-19, and more extensive changes are required for the reopening of WIC clinics. However, a lack of guidance from USDA, undecided and shifting policies related to restrictions, and high foot-traffic in clinic settings make it difficult for WIC coordinators to come up with comprehensive plans for a safe reopening, providing high-quality services, and maintaining a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere. Specific concerns about clinic operation include:

- Hard to keep an eye on areas to sanitize, because children touch everything and put toys everywhere, especially when single parents bring all their kids to appointments
- Lack of guidance from USDA
- Concerns around tightening restrictions again if there is a resurgence in cases
- Losing the welcoming and comfortable atmosphere we have attempted to create at clinics and replacing it with a very sterile and cold feel with PPE and distancing that is required to keep everyone safe
- Co-location of clinics with COVID-19 testing sites at other public health services
- Catching up on all of the missing information that was waived with the waivers-- completing eligibility and heights/weights/hemoglobin for all appointments after 're-opening' instead of gradually catching up on that information at the next certification appointment

### *About Staff:*

To achieve a safe reopening and offer high-quality services in clinic settings, WIC providers are expected to assume heavy responsibilities, be flexible with new policies and guidelines, and face potential risks to their own health. A large amount of concerns are raised upon measures to keep staffs and their families healthy, both physically and mentally, as well as a lack of staff and additional staff time needed to compensate for potentially increased caseload. Specific concerns about staff include:

- Staff shortage due to:
  - Staff may prefer to work from home, losing face-to-face interactions with participants
  - Infected staff need to quarantine for 2 weeks and are not able to provide services
  - Have to quarantine if a participant comes in and is diagnosed positive for COVID
  - Extra staff needed to do sanitizing/disinfecting work throughout the day
  - Hiring freezes
- Staff members will work in a stressful environment
- Additional staff time needed to complete the increase in measurement appointments which have been pushed back due to waivers

### *About Safety & Sanitation:*

It is crucial for WIC clinics to operate and continue offering support for participants in a safe environment. However, for most clinics, personal protective equipments are in short supply, safety procedures are difficult and time consuming, and the spread of virus is still concerning with currently suggested safe measures. Specific concerns about safety and sanitation include:

- Safety procedures (testing temperature, having participants wash hands, etc.) are difficult and time consuming, resulting in disarranged appointment times and clinic flow
- There is no guarantee that the virus won't spread, either by participants who've been exposed or via air as masks don't tightly seal around the face.
- The lack of safe waiting space and packed offices with talking required
- The lack of adequate PPE supplies and additional electronic equipment to achieve social distance, and relevant funding
- How to conduct measurements while practicing social distancing and safety protocols

### *Conclusion:*

WIC providers worked in record time to establish remote or modified services to assure effective service delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. With many states still reporting increased confirmed cases of COVID-19, WIC providers have voiced their strong preference to maintain remote or modified services and expressed several barriers to creating safe clinic environments in the near future. This is especially critical as the majority of states are reporting increases in participation, with more need projected in the coming months given national economic metrics. While additional guidance could mitigate some of these concerns about clinic environments, more time is needed to allow agencies to develop comprehensive plans, resolve procurement challenges for protective and cleaning supplies, and address participant and staff anxieties about trends in confirmed COVID-19 cases. NWA will continue to monitor provider concerns and advocate for sensible solutions that assure safe and effective delivery of WIC services.