

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 1, 2022

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We, the undersigned members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, applaud your leadership and the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to building nutrition security. The recent White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health elevated the national discourse centered on steps to eradicate hunger for low-income families and reduce the rates of chronic diet-related conditions that disproportionately impact communities of color. Consistent with the administration's priorities, we urge you to bolster equitable access to nutritious foods by swiftly advancing a science-based review of the food packages provided through the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

WIC is an effective nutrition security and health equity support, delivering assistance in purchasing healthy foods and quality nutrition services for approximately 2.9 million Hispanic participants, 313,000 AANHPI participants, and other communities of color each year.¹ Further, WIC serves 68% of all Hispanic infants born in the United States.² WIC's unparalleled record of improved pregnancy, birth, and child nutrition outcomes is one of the nation's most successful investments – returning \$2.48 in medical cost savings for every federal dollar spent.³

In 2009, WIC took a substantial step to reduce nutrition disparities by revising WIC food packages to more closely align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs). USDA's actions introduced fruits, vegetables, and whole grains to the WIC benefit, resulting in healthier eating habits and increased consumption of these core food groups.⁴ The 2009 food package revisions were a resounding public health and health equity success, significantly reducing obesity rates for WIC-enrolled toddlers between 2010 and 2018 – including an 11% reduction for Hispanic children, a 17% reduction for AANHPI children.⁵

¹ U.S. Department of Agriculture (2022) WIC Participant and Program Characteristics: 2020 Final Report, at 42, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/WICPC2020-1.pdf>

² Compare U.S. Department of Agriculture (2022) National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2019, Final Report, at 36, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/resource-files/WICEligibles2019-Volume1-revised.pdf>, with Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Osterman MJK, Driscoll AK (2021) Births: Final Data for 2019, National Vital Statistics Reports 70(2), <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr70/nvsr70-02-508.pdf>.

³ Nianogo RA, Wang MC, Basurto-Davila R, Nobari TZ, Prelip M, Arah OA, Whaley SE (2019) Economic evaluation of California prenatal participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to prevent preterm birth, *Journal of Preventive Medicine* 124:42-49, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2019.04.011>.

⁴ Chiasson MA, Findley SE, Sekhobo JP, Scheinmann R, Edmunds LS, Faly AS, McLeod NJ (2013) Changing WIC changes what children eat. *Obesity* 21(7):1423-1429, <https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.20295>.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Obesity Among WIC-Enrolled Young Children, Table 3 (last updated May 24, 2021), <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/obesity-among-WIC-enrolled-young-children.html>.

USDA now has an opportunity to strengthen WIC’s impact in fostering equitable access to nutritious foods. In 2017, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) reviewed the WIC food packages and made comprehensive, independent recommendations that promote further alignment with the DGAs.⁶ This science-based report was rooted in the core principles that were validated by the 2009 food package reforms: providing more balanced diets for WIC’s target population by boosting intake of under consumed food groups such as fruits, vegetables, seafood, and whole grains through increased issuance and stronger nutrition standards.

Congress has long demonstrated a commitment to WIC’s science-based review process, requiring in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 that USDA look to nutrition science when reevaluating the WIC food packages.⁷ In the American Rescue Plan Act and subsequent appropriations legislation, Congress drew upon the wisdom of the NASEM report when boosting the benefit levels for WIC – investing additional funding in the fruit and vegetable benefit to reach the NASEM target of 50% intake for these core food groups.⁸ As with the 2009 food package reforms, this evidence-based action yielded public health success, with WIC children reporting a measurable increase in fruit and vegetable consumption mere months after additional benefits were provided.⁹

We are confident that the thoughtful, comprehensive approach of the NASEM review will positively contribute to the dietary quality of our communities and ensure that parents from Hispanic, AANHPI, and other communities of color have the resources and support to secure future life success for their children. Sensible steps – such as adopting the whole grain-rich standard for cereals and allowing substitution of the entire juice benefit for whole fruit – work to close intake disparities that disproportionately affect communities of color.¹⁰

With the nation’s attention focused on reducing hunger and chronic diet-related conditions, WIC is positioned to strengthen its formidable impact on health outcomes. We urge USDA to act quickly to implement the independent NASEM recommendations and bolster the overall value of the WIC benefit to support the long-term health of our next generation.

Sincerely,



Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Chair
Congressional Hispanic Caucus



Judy Chu, Ph.D.
Chair
Congressional Asian Pacific
American Caucus



Pete Aguilar
Member of Congress
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⁶ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2017) Review of the WIC Food Packages: Improving Balance and Choice: Final Report, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/2017-nasem-report.pdf>.

⁷ 42 U.S.C. §1786(f)(10)(C).

⁸ See NASEM Report at 271, 454-455.

⁹ National WIC Association & Nutrition Policy Institute (2022) Multi-State WIC Participant Satisfaction Survey: Cash Value Benefit Increase During COVID, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/aws.upl/nwica.org/nwa-multi-state-cvb-report-march-2022.pdf>.

¹⁰ See U.S. Department of Agriculture, Agriculture Research Service. Food Patterns Equivalents Database (FPED) 2017-2018, NHANES 2017-2018, https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARSUserFiles/80400530/pdf/fped/Table_2_FPED_RAC_1718.pdf.

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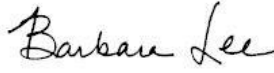
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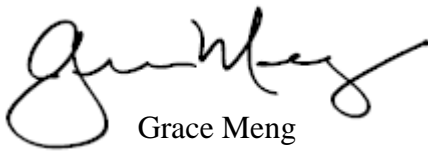
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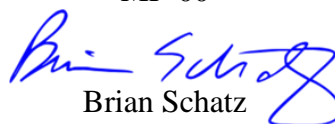
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