



CHILD NUTRITION REAUTHORIZATION: PRIORITIZING HEALTHIER OUTCOMES FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

NWA RECOMMENDS:

Congress should advance comprehensive updates to WIC and child nutrition programs to ensure access to healthy foods during critical periods of growth and development.

CNR: LONG OVERDUE

Since the Child Nutrition Act was passed in 1966, Congress routinely has updated program rules to ensure that WIC, the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), the school meals programs, and summer feeding are positioned to serve the nutritional needs of America's next generation. Congress has not passed a Child Nutrition Reauthorization into law since the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, more than a dozen years ago.

In the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, Congress charged WIC agencies to transition from paper vouchers to EBT technology. In the intervening decade, WIC has weathered complex program adaptations to reach eligible families in increasingly digital times. Absent Congressional review, WIC has built stopgap solutions to deliver remote services, scale up online shopping, and strengthen infant feeding support during nationwide infant formula shortages.

In 2022, Congress passed a narrow nutrition package that enacted long overdue reforms so that school-age children would be fed during the summer months. This is just the first step. Especially as Congress focuses on a Farm Bill, WIC reforms should not be put on the back-burner. Action is needed to unleash more accessible services that meet the expectations of modern parents and align with the experience delivered by healthcare and retailers to the general public.



DELAYED REFORMS IMPACT WIC ACCESS

Since 2010, Congress attempted twice to reauthorize WIC and child nutrition programs. Most recently, the House Education and Labor Committee put forth a comprehensive bill in July 2022. This bill - the Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids Act led by then-Chairman Bobby Scott (D-VA) - sought to build lessons learned while operating programs during COVID-19 into a forward-looking vision of how to modernize program delivery.

Updating the WIC program experience to address persistent access barriers is a critical theme across legislative efforts in child nutrition. With WIC's child participation increasing by 12% from 2020-2022, statutory flexibility to allow for remote certifications is critical in reaching the nearly 50% of eligible participants who are not enrolled in WIC. Other efforts to streamline certifications and reduce paperwork barriers on applicants and provider agencies can ensure that more eligible families are connected with WIC services.

New investments in WIC's nutrition education, breastfeeding services, and vendor management efforts can also modernize the participant experience and draw more eligible families to the program. Online nutrition education platforms, WIC mobile apps, and modern shopping models - including home delivery and mobile payments - require sustained technology investment. Bolder efforts, including two-way information channels with healthcare providers, can enhance the public health impacts of WIC services to more thoughtfully coordinate care and address the families' holistic health needs.

Bipartisan proposals to expand WIC access have also been delayed by inaction on reauthorization. Longer postpartum eligibility could mitigate the nation's maternal health crisis, and closing the gap between WIC and school meals reduces the risk of food insecurity before school entry. As WIC modernizes to reach a larger share of the eligible population, these thoughtful updates to WIC require a more comprehensive approach and a full reauthorization process.