



CONNECTING WIC WITH LOCAL FARMERS

NWA RECOMMENDS:

Modern transaction technologies and other program flexibilities are needed to expand WIC redemptions at farmers markets and strengthen the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP).

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has a long history of engaging local farmers and producers. In addition to offering selections of fresh produce, local farmers can help educate parents and engage WIC children on the local food supply, encouraging consumption of nutritious, locally sourced foods. New innovations and program flexibilities can deepen WIC's partnership with local farm economies to return investment directly to the community.

SIMPLIFIED WIC/ FMNP TRANSACTIONS

In 1992, Congress established the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) to encourage WIC families to purchase fruits and vegetables from local farmers, farmers markets, and farm stands. FMNP predated a fruit and vegetable benefit in WIC by more than 15 years. With a modest value of, at most, \$30 per participant *per year*, FMNP has never been funded at an adequate level to reach every WIC participant or even be offered in every State.

When WIC introduced the Cash Value Benefit for fruits and vegetables, farmers were soon challenged by the program-wide shift toward electronic benefit transfer (EBT) transactions. Although a variety of strategies were tested, very few farmers or farmers markets were certified to accept WIC transactions.



New State technologies developed and tested in 2022 opened the door for increased WIC investment at farmers markets. Aided by funding from the American Rescue Plan Act, four State WIC agencies developed and rolled out mobile-to-mobile payments for FMNP benefits. This cost-efficient technology linked to a farmer's smartphone reduces the burden of purchasing and maintaining a handheld EBT point-of-sale device. Farmers and FMNP participants in Maine, Chickasaw Nation, Kentucky, and New Mexico reported high levels of satisfaction with the new technology.

In Maine, new mobile-to-mobile technologies integrated the WIC and FMNP benefits, ensuring that WIC families could redeem a larger value of fruit and vegetable benefits with farmers, farm stands, and farmers markets. Especially with the recent increases in WIC's Cash Value Benefit, this opens a substantially larger market to local producers and could redirect significant federal investment toward small businesses. NWA urges USDA and State WIC agencies to unlock this technological capacity nationwide.

EXPANDING FMNP

FMNP has never had adequate funding despite the clear public health benefits of promoting fruit and vegetable consumption and the economic benefits of directing federal investment to the local farm economy. In 2021, FMNP served less than one-in-five WIC participants with a budget of less than \$30 million. Enhanced federal funding can expand FMNP's reach and impact.

Outdated program rules may also complicate FMNP expansion. Nine geographic States do not operate a FMNP program, with the small but administratively complex state-match requirement serving as a barrier to standing up new programs. Limited administrative funds delayed program innovations, such as mobile-to-mobile payment technologies, that improve utilization and customer experience. In addition to new investments, FMNP would benefit from updates to program rules to account for shifts in farmers market management and the increasing use of digital tools to improve FMNP's operations.