ENHANCING NUTRITION SECURITY: USDA UPDATES TO THE WIC FOOD PACKAGES

NWA RECOMMENDS:

Congress should support swift implementation of revised WIC food packages, which align with the Dietary Guidelines.

BUILDING HEALTHIER EATING PATTERNS

In April 2024, USDA finalized science-based updates to the WIC food packages, which deliver healthy, developmentally appropriate foods to the 6.6 million women, infants, and children participating in WIC. USDA's updates are closely aligned with consensus expert recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences and the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the first edition that offered life-stage diet patterns for pregnancy, lactation, and infancy.

The National WIC Association is in strong support of USDA's proposed updates to the WIC food package. Targeted increases to core food groups - including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein foods like seafood - will ensure that WIC can deliver priority nutrients and encourage enhanced dietary variety among participants and their families. With USDA incorporating direction from Congress to boost fruit and vegetable issuance to 50% of DGA-recommended intake, WIC families are purchasing more nutritious foods and introducing a greater variety of healthy foods to their young children.

In the new food packages, dairy and fruits amount to three-quarters of DGA-recommended intake, whole grains and vegetables fall just short of half of recommended intake, and protein foods (e.g., eggs, seafood) amount to one-third.

USDA's final rule also takes steps to align issuance patterns within food groups to promote consistency with the DGAs. With added fruit and vegetable dollars, WIC is now issuing a majority of fruit as *whole fruit*, compared to 100% fruit juice, for the first time in the program's history. WIC will also require all cereals to meet a whole grain standard, already met by 83 percent of WIC-approved cereals. These shifts accord with the DGAs, which recommend that half of fruit consumed should be whole fruit and that half of all grains consumed should be whole grains.

IMPROVED CHOICE

As USDA adjusts issuance to reflect a more balanced approach that aligns with the DGAs, the final rule will also significantly expand package and container size flexibility. This will improve choice for WIC shoppers within a single product (e.g., allowing single-serve/multipack yogurt containers), reducing ongoing barriers in the shopping experience. Also improving choice for WIC shoppers, the final rule offers a greater range of options to account for cultural preferences.

USDA's final rule offers greater choice within the dairy category, allowing for increased access to yogurt and soy-based alternatives. USDA also puts forth a vision for other plant-based alternatives to be approved, if they deliver the same level of priority nutrients as fluid milk. This is consistent with efforts to fortify yogurt and soy-based products with nutrients like vitamin D, calcium, and protein. Although few, if any, equivalent plant-based products are available on the market, this pathway encourages industry innovation and paves the way for healthier products that will be available to both WIC shoppers and the general public.

Through increased access to nutritious foods, enhanced choice among WIC-approved products, and pathways for healthier products to come to market, USDA's final rule enhances WIC's efforts to build nutrition security and healthier eating patterns for millions of participants, setting the stage for a healthier nation.