INVESTING IN WIC BUILDS A HEALTHIER AMERICA

For nearly fifty years, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has proven to be one of the most effective investments. With a targeted, time-limited nutrition intervention at critical times of growth and development, WIC more than doubles its return on federal investment by reducing short- and long-term healthcare costs for families and setting the stage for healthier outcomes.

Since the mid-1990s, Congress has maintained a bipartisan commitment to fund WIC at the level needed to meet projected caseload. This ongoing support for WIC’s public health mission discontinued earlier practices of waiting lists that kept eligible women and children from WIC’s life-saving nutrition support. WIC continues to be a critical tool in broader public health efforts that address urgent national priorities, including preterm birth, maternal and infant mortality, disparities in breastfeeding, and curbing childhood obesity.

Despite this strong record of improving health outcomes, WIC participation declined throughout the 2010s. Recent efforts taken by Congress on a bipartisan basis, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and State WIC agencies have reversed this trend and ensured that WIC is now serving a larger share of the eligible population.

Increased participation requires a larger funding commitment from Congress to assure that projected participants can access WIC’s nutrition support. The National WIC Association (NWA) strongly urges Congress to honor its longstanding commitment to fund WIC and stands opposed to any funding level that would cut benefits or access to WIC services.

The President’s Budget signaled that growing participation and higher food costs would require more investment ($615 million above FY23 levels) to assure WIC can continue to serve projected caseload. Although participation trends warrant continued monitoring, NWA estimates that the rate of WIC participation growth will outpace estimates in the President’s Budget, requiring a higher appropriation for WIC’s nutrition services to support a healthier next generation. NWA opposes proposals to offset increased funding needs with cuts to WIC benefits and notes that recent proposals to reduce WIC’s Cash Value Benefit (CVB) will no longer generate sufficient savings to avoid waiting lists and assure that WIC can continue to serve its growing caseload.
More recent data indicates that earlier projections fall short of the current rate observed through the first six months of fiscal year 2023. NWA’s earlier projections for March 2023 wound up more than 181,000 participants below newly released USDA data.

Participation growth is observed across the most underserved categories. Since first measuring the eligible population in 2000, USDA has consistently estimated that smaller shares of the eligible child (40.6% in 2020), pregnant (45.6%), and breastfeeding (60.4%) populations are connected with WIC services. In fiscal year 2022, all three groups registered notable increases in participation: 3.7% increase for children, 6.3% increase for pregnant women, and 18.7% increase for breastfeeding. More pregnant participants, in particular, could have a spillover effect if the family is retained for the duration of program eligibility.

WIC program improvements and broader economic trends likely contributed to this surge in WIC utilization. Modernization efforts, like remote appointments, have made it easier to connect with and remain on WIC. Enhanced fruit and vegetable benefits have been crucial for WIC’s nutritionally at-risk families dealing with higher grocery prices.

Last year’s infant formula shortages may impact the rate of participation growth. As WIC recorded higher participation for breastfeeding women (18.7% increase) and infants (17.2%) in fiscal year 2022, WIC noted declines in non-breastfeeding postpartum women (11.7% decline) and formula-fed infants (8% decline). With the market stabilizing, these groups are recovering in the first six months of fiscal year 2023 (6.1% increase for non-breastfeeding women and 1.6% increase for formula-fed infants). Progress made in supporting breastfeeding remains significant in fiscal year 2023 - with a 6.1% increase in breastfed infants and a 5% increase in breastfeeding women, resulting in a record high in the proportion of WIC infants that are breastfed.

Although March 2023 recorded an increase of more than 108,000 participants, NWA is not confident that this increase yet accounts for the expiration of SNAP emergency allotments in 32 states. The 18 states that already phased out SNAP allotments recorded a higher average increase in WIC caseload in March 2023 than the other 32, with the three largest increases occurring in states that had already phased out the SNAP allotments (Arkansas, Tennessee, and Georgia).

FASTER GROWTH IN WIC CASELOAD

In March 2023, the President’s Budget requested $6.3 billion in budget authority for WIC to serve a projected increase in caseload to an average of 6.5 million participants across fiscal year 2024. With additional data now available to reflect the first six months of actual WIC participation in fiscal year 2023, WIC is already serving 6.6 million participants and the rate of participation growth is accelerating.

WIC caseload projections rely on new and evolving data sets to accurately predict need and steer resources to families in need. Policymakers must continue to observe trends as new data is available to ensure that WIC is prepared to serve all eligible families who reach out for WIC’s life-saving nutrition support.

The most recent data published by USDA (March 2023) indicates that the rate of participation growth has accelerated in recent months. In fiscal year 2022, WIC grew by an average of 16,568 participants. In the first six months of fiscal year 2023, WIC participation has increased at a rate that is double the prior year’s trend - an average of 34,932 new participants per month. WIC participation has already grown by more than 209,000 participants in the past six months - from 6.39 million participants to 6.6 million.

In early 2023, NWA conducted analysis based on data published through September 2022. Based on the available data’s slower rate of participation growth, NWA estimated WIC would first serve more than 6.5 million participants in January 2024 and serve an average of 6.53 million people across fiscal year 2024.

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**BUILDING NUTRITION SECURITY**

Since September 2021, Congress has worked on a bipartisan basis to align WIC's fruit and vegetable benefit with science-based recommendations. Congress and USDA have previously increased WIC's Cash Value Benefit (CVB) in 2007, 2010, and 2014 to improve access to healthy produce for WIC's target population. This year, Congress must avoid scaling back the effectiveness of WIC support when funding the program.

"It would crush me. I rely on this assistance to keep my toddler on fresh fruits and vegetables. I am proud of how much he loves produce and feel that it is perhaps the healthiest part of his diet. With less money, I wouldn’t be able to feed him as well."

- Alex Spencer Ithaca, NY

The adjustments made in fiscal years 2022 and 2023 allow children only $25 per month for produce. Women receive between $44-49 per month, based on breastfeeding status. Enhanced fruit and vegetable benefits support more than 5.1 million WIC participants (3.6 million children and 1.5 million pregnant women and new moms).

These targeted, science-based increases are associated with improved consumption of fruits and vegetables among WIC-enrolled toddlers, enhanced variety of fruit and vegetable purchases, and higher total purchases of fruits and vegetables by WIC families. Consistent with WIC's mission of building healthier eating patterns, NWA supports recent USDA proposals to make these amounts permanent.

**HIGHER FOOD COSTS**

In addition to higher participation, WIC funding is also impacted by the higher food costs. With the exception of the CVB to provide fruits and vegetables, WIC foods are issued by quantity to ensure that participants access the nutritionally recommended amounts of prescribed foods, including dairy, eggs, seafood, and whole grains. As a result, WIC absorbs the costs of rising prices.

In nearly fifty years of program operations, Congress has never cut WIC benefits to accommodate growing participation or provide adequate funding.

WIC food package costs increased to account for higher prices at the grocery store, reaching a high of $59.83 per participant in January 2023. While additional data may shed light on whether prices are declining and relieving pressures on WIC food dollars, USDA data suggests that food costs are starting to stabilize - going down to $53.15 in March 2023.

In April 2023, many core WIC food groups remained at higher prices than the prior year, including eggs (21.4% higher costs), cereals and whole grains (12.4% higher costs), and dairy (8% higher costs). Still, average food costs remain higher in the first six months of fiscal year 2023 ($54.06) compared to fiscal year 2022 ($47.72).

**WIC ACCESS IS AT RISK**

In fiscal year 2023, WIC was funded at $6 billion with a $315 million rescission. This accounted for 22.3% of the $25.48 billion in discretionary spending in the Agriculture/FDA bill. If the bill is given a flat allocation in 2024, the $615 million needed to reach the President’s Budget level would account for 2.5% of the total bill.

The Agriculture/FDA bill is the second smallest of the twelve appropriations bills and has consistently seen the smallest increases from year-to-year. Other priorities within the bill could be jeopardized by an insufficient allocation, such as food safety, rural development, conservation, agricultural research, and the Food and Drug Administration.

If Congress does not adequately fund WIC, providers would have to institute waiting lists for the first time in three decades, since President Bill Clinton and Speaker Newt Gingrich worked together to assure full funding for WIC. New applicants and existing participants would be quickly impacted by a funding shortfall. Per federal regulations, non-breastfeeding postpartum women - having just endured the infant formula shortages - would be the first to be triaged from the program. Children would then be the next excluded from WIC support.

WIC support is critical in building healthier outcomes and seeing families through transformative periods of pregnancy, childbirth, and early childhood. Inadequate funding could lead to a spike in hunger rates among WIC's at-risk target population, while also reversing progress in improving dietary quality, closing health disparities, and boosting health outcomes for young children.

Failure to adequately fund WIC could send thousands of new moms and toddlers to waiting lists, taking healthy food from their mouths. Congress must fund WIC and avoid breaching its ongoing commitment to fostering a healthier next generation.