



# WIC'S ROLE EMERGING FROM 2022'S INFANT FORMULA SHORTAGES

## NWA RECOMMENDS:

The landscape of infant feeding must shift to strengthen lactation support services. Expanded infant formula brand options for WIC families are only possible if Congress considers broader implications to WIC access and the cost of infant formula.

## WIC'S RESPONSE TO THE ABBOTT RECALL

In February 2022, Abbott Nutrition announced a nationwide recall of infant formula products produced at their Michigan facility after persistent safety violations raised the possibility that Abbott products were connected to a *Cronobacter* outbreak resulting in multiple infant deaths and illnesses.

WIC families were disproportionately impacted by subsequent shortages of infant formula, because Congress has required that WIC agencies adopt a *sole-supplier contracting* model. This means that WIC participants can only redeem one brand of infant formula in each state. When Abbott products were pulled off the shelf after the recall, nearly half of all WIC participants lacked meaningful access to safe infant formula.

For nearly a year, State WIC agencies exercised contract flexibilities and USDA waivers to offer a broader range of infant formula brands and container sizes. These steps mitigated the specific complications for WIC families as they navigated shortages that affected every formula-feeding household in the country. WIC counselors also supported pregnant women and mothers in setting breastfeeding goals throughout the recall. USDA flexibilities are being phased out in spring 2023, returning WIC benefits to the one-brand limit.



## REIMAGINING INFANT FEEDING

The unprecedented scale of the infant formula shortages raised serious questions about how the United States approaches infant feeding. Legislators are exploring efforts to restructure the Food and Drug Administration's safety oversight and reduce barriers-to-entry for new domestic and foreign formula manufacturers.

NWA urges the United States to adopt the World Health Organization's International Code on Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, joining the global community in regulating aggressive and persistent promotion of infant formula. Breastfeeding success can be shaped by decisions at the hospital or in early days after delivery. Further investment in lactation support, both within and beyond WIC, is needed to empower mothers in setting and meeting their lactation goals, even before workplace barriers affect breastfeeding duration.

As WIC serves nearly half of all infants in the United States, the participant experience during 2022's shortages raises questions as to whether WIC's sole-source model best supports infant nutrition. Limited WIC choices and complex market incentives impact infant formula supply, distribution, and pricing of infant formula.

WIC's sole-source model generates federal savings that support WIC's overall caseload. Policymakers should be cautious in departing from sole-source contracting unless certain conditions are met. **NWA particularly urges that:**

1. Any reforms cannot come at the expense of access to WIC services
2. Expanded choice for WIC families should not put WIC in the middle of corporate competition
3. Price/cost containment remains a priority, given WIC's oversized share of the market
4. Funding lactation support must be prioritized to empower mothers in reaching their breastfeeding goals