



Stronger WIC, Healthier Kids and Moms

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What is the issue?

Nearly half of the children born each year in the U.S. rely on WIC to begin life with healthy nutrition. The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) serves over 6 million women, infants, and children through age 4 who benefit from WIC’s food package, breastfeeding and other nutrition counseling, and from referrals to other services. WIC’s benefits also stretch household food budgets, save medical costs, and boost local economies. Studies show that \$1 invested in WIC saves about \$2.48 in medical, educational, and productivity costs.

Early efforts to reduce COVID-19 transmission threatened to sever eligible participants’ access to WIC benefits. Recognizing the critical importance of WIC benefits, Congress authorized the USDA to issue a set of waivers that have permitted WIC agencies to deliver benefits and services in new, largely technology-based ways, without compromising safety. Also, during the pandemic, the WIC cash value benefit to purchase fruit and vegetables was temporarily increased from \$9 or \$11 to \$35 per month. The cash value benefit is now \$24 for children and \$43/\$47 for women.

In 2020-2021, UC Nutrition Policy Institute and Heluna Health’s PHFE-WIC Program and their partners took advantage of this “natural experiment” to evaluate the new service options. Through interviews, surveys, and convenings—local, statewide, and multi-state—research revealed what these operational changes achieved, and, based on these findings, key stakeholders developed policy recommendations. This brief brings the voices of WIC participants and local agency directors in California, as captured in our research, to inform Congress.

There are several opportunities for Congress and the USDA to strengthen WIC:

- Child Nutrition Reauthorization
- annual appropriations
- WIC-specific bills
- USDA Rule-Making

What are the Major Recommendations?

Overarching recommendation: a hybrid model. Strong consensus supported a full range of options, giving WIC agencies and participants the ability to use both new, largely technology-based, virtual service delivery and the traditional, mostly in-person processes. In a 2021 survey of over 26,000 WIC participants, 45% said they would prefer to receive WIC services entirely remotely. This hybrid model can help meet participants where they are.

“We would still like to give people the opportunity to receive our services remotely. Just give them options...for us to “meet them where they are” and not have it be so difficult to get our benefits.”
- WIC agency director



Recommendations for strengthening WIC are:

- **Permit women, infants, and children to enroll and to recertify for benefits remotely, actions that previously were required to be done in person.** Apart from COVID safety concerns, office visits often require women and caregivers to take time from work, to find childcare, and to face transportation complications.

“I actually found it much...easier (than in the past) because I didn't have to go into the office and talk to them in person. Because with kids, especially if you can't find a babysitter. So I found it more convenient for me, because I have such a busy schedule because of school. So it works perfectly for me.” - WIC participant

- **Extend the grace period to recertify children from 30 to 90 days.** Recognizing caregivers' difficulties in gathering necessary documentation and the other demands for their time, the longer grace period will help protect participants from unintended loss of benefits.

"[It] would be really great to have that tool (extended certification) in our back pocket and if it comes to we either recertify in three months, or we lose this client, I would like to have the option to bump it and recertify in three months." - WIC agency director

- **Offer remote access to food benefits, nutrition education, and counseling.** Issuing food benefits on an EBT card and continuing to offer remote education when appropriate save non-essential office visits.

"It's just unnecessary at times to have a person come in physically, when we can deliver the benefits electronically...What a waste of time to have them walk into an old-fashioned building so that we can say, "I'm going to press a button. I did it. Okay, now leave." - WIC agency director

"It can be very hectic for them (WIC participants at an agency visit). And we don't really have their attention when we're trying to counsel them. But when it's at home, they're more relaxed and they're just happier." - WIC agency director

- **Eliminate separation of agency duties.** Before COVID, as potential fraud protection, separate WIC workers were required to certify eligibility and to issue benefits. Agency directors concurred that the increased efficiency and personalization from consolidating those services outweighed the likelihood of potential fraud.

"It's easier for the staff and for the client; they don't have to talk to two different people...The (staff) person that's asking a question are (sic) getting more information when they're going through the whole thing. And I think the clients are more comfortable just talking to whoever [is] the one person they started with rather than getting passed along." - WIC agency director

- **Authorize funds to support technology modernization.** The remote processes introduced by the COVID waivers require funding for more and more up-to-date technology and equipment.

"[Incorporation of virtual options] has just really changed how we can do things and it's opened my eyes to just how we can...make it easier on the participants." - WIC agency director

- **Permanently increase the Cash Value Benefit for fruits and vegetables.** Participants' fruit and vegetable intake increased with the larger amount, and the higher benefit was found by participants to allow for a greater variety of fruit and vegetable purchases.

"[The increase] is just right because you were able to plan out your snacks and meals a little bit better and get all the fruits and vegetables you needed. Like bell peppers, onions, things like that, that you would normally cook, salad, you know things that you would normally use." - WIC participant

"It has afforded me to get a variety of things that I wasn't able to get before, and actually introduce my children to a lot more vegetables that were out of our reach." - WIC participant

References: (1) Ritchie L, Lee DL, Sallack L, Chauvenet C, Machell G, Kim L, Song L, Whaley SE. Multi-state WIC Participants Satisfaction Survey: Learning from Program Adaptations During COVID. Funded by the National WIC Association, UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute, Pepperdine University, and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation. December 2021. <https://thewichub.org/multi-state-wic-participant-satisfaction-survey-learning-from-program-adaptations-during-covid/> (2) Ritchie L, Lee D, Felix C, Sallack L, Chauvenet C, Machell G, Whaley SE. Multi-State WIC Participant Survey: Cash Value Benefit Increase During COVID. The National WIC Association and Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources. 1 March 2022. <https://thewichub.org/multi-state-wic-participant-satisfaction-survey-cash-value-benefit-increasing-during-covid/> (3) Ritchie L, Hecht C, Au L, Vital N, Strohlic R, Tsai M, Hecht K, Olague C, Rios A, Anderson C, Martinez C, Meza M, Whaley S. Informing the Future of WIC: Lessons Learned during COVID-19 from California WIC Participants. UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute. Public Health Foundation Enterprises-WIC. 9 June 2021. <https://ucanr.edu/sites/NewNutritionPolicyInstitute/files/352389.pdf> (4) L Ritchie, C Hecht, L Au, N Vital, M Tsai, K Hecht, C Anderson, C Martinez, M Meza, S Whaley. Informing the Future of WIC: Lessons Learned during COVID-19 from California Agency Directors. UC ANR Nutrition Policy Institute. Public Health Foundation Enterprises-WIC. 9 June 2021. <https://ucanr.edu/sites/NewNutritionPolicyInstitute/files/352390.pdf>

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