



# MODERNIZING THE WIC SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

## NWA RECOMMENDS:

USDA should proactively engage stakeholders in scaling up modern, accessible, and equitable shopping options for WIC families, including online platforms and mobile payments.

With the introduction of EBT transaction technology, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has only taken its first step in modernizing the WIC shopping experience. With the retail grocery industry and other federal programs adopting more recent technologies, WIC must continue to innovate and reduce burdens for WIC shoppers.

## ONLINE SHOPPING

Online shopping platforms are well suited to remedy pain points in the WIC shopping experience. As already demonstrated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), online shopping platforms can customize the item selection process before check-out, with virtual shelf tags and item filters that can screen out products that cannot be redeemed with federal benefits. Especially as WIC's healthy food prescription has more limited choice than the SNAP benefit, WIC participants would particularly benefit from these features.

SNAP was well positioned to scale up online shopping, because the 2014 Farm Bill had authorized and funded pilot projects. Within the first few months of the pandemic, online SNAP was made available to nearly 90% of all recipients. WIC could not readily import technology solutions from SNAP, as the WIC transaction is different and more complex due to the limitations of the food package.



In 2020, USDA initiated a pilot project to test and evaluate online ordering platforms with the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition. Four State WIC agency/retailer projects received subgrants in 2021: Washington State and Walmart; Minnesota and Hy-Vee; South Dakota and Bucche Foods; and Nevada and SaveMart. These projects remain in development, and other State-driven innovations are starting to test online transactions.

In February 2023, USDA proposed revisions to its vendor regulations to account for necessary changes to empower further innovations in the shopping space. The proposed rule would not only permit online transactions, but would pave the way for internet vendors and modern transaction technologies like mobile payments. These changes will require different approaches in WIC vendor management, with increased emphasis on oversight of technology platforms. NWA welcomes these proposals, which will engage new WIC retailers and provide clarity for current and emerging projects to ensure that WIC participants can soon utilize online platforms.

## ELEVATING EQUITY

As USDA and stakeholders unleash new innovations in the shopping space, WIC's efforts must assure equitable access to online platforms and new technologies. State WIC agencies will need to work to ensure that online platforms are accessible, have the scope of coverage to serve WIC's diverse population, and do not impose insurmountable barriers to utilization, especially through fees imposed on participants to utilize online platforms and retailers to process online transactions. As with the transition to EBT, targeted support may be needed to ensure ongoing access to smaller vendors.

Online shopping platforms should also amplify and reflect WIC's core nutrition mission, with adequate safeguards in place to assure healthy food environments. With increased attention on the direct marketing focused at children, USDA and other stakeholders should be mindful of how data is collected and used on online shopping platforms.

