



ENHANCING EFFORTS TO REACH ELIGIBLE WIC FAMILIES

NWA RECOMMENDS:

USDA should empower State WIC agencies to employ a variety of outreach strategies that will boost coverage rates and expand WIC's reach and public health impact.

Despite a clear record of improved maternal, infant, and child health outcomes, WIC is currently serving approximately half of the total eligible population. The American Rescue Plan Act included funding to strengthen WIC outreach efforts to close this gap and promote fuller utilization of WIC's effective nutrition services.

WIC outreach is best targeted at two participant categories. WIC has been challenged in swiftly onboarding pregnant participants, with only 23% of eligible pregnant participants certified in their first trimester. Similarly, a diminishing share of children are served by WIC as they grow, with steep declines at each year mark until only approximately 25 percent of eligible four-year-olds are served.

RAISING AWARENESS

WIC has high name recognition, but deeper public knowledge about the breadth of services provided by WIC could enhance overall participation. WIC providers constantly correct misconceptions about the program's scope, rebutting presumptions of scarcity that are likely attributable to WIC's historic practice of using waiting lists. With higher participation rates among communities of color, WIC providers must navigate implicit bias among prospective white applicants. Recent modernization efforts could dispel perceptions that WIC is antiquated and generate new interest among eligible families.



Since 2014, State WIC agencies have joined together to elevate consistent public messages through NWA's National Recruitment and Retention Campaign. This campaign currently serves 68 State WIC agencies with a multi-platform, digital marketing strategy to raise awareness and drive enrollment in WIC. Drawing on the success of this effort, USDA recently contracted with Porter Novelli, a public relations firm, to conduct a five-year public health outreach campaign.

Even when eligible families are aware of the benefits of WIC, the application process differs significantly from other federal programs due to WIC's public health services and traditionally in-person approach. To improve community outreach efforts, USDA awarded a \$20 million cooperative agreement to the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC) to test and evaluate local strategies to connect eligible families with WIC services. These efforts must be paired with digital tools and improvements to the WIC application, including unified online applications with partner programs like SNAP and Medicaid.

LEVERAGING DATA

State WIC agencies are increasingly leaning on program partnerships, including with SNAP and Medicaid, to identify eligible individuals and conduct proactive outreach. Fifteen States, for example, already have interoperable systems with Medicaid and several States have pulled data from other programs to strengthen cross-enrollment efforts.

Further investment in WIC technology can connect WIC systems with electronic health records, creating a pathway to automate sharing of data needed for both eligibility and WIC's individualized nutrition counseling. NWA is partnering with State WIC agencies to pilot new strategies to connect WIC platforms with health plans, which would simplify referrals from the healthcare sector and more holistically coordinate care. As the WIC application and certification process evolves in the coming years, State WIC agencies will need to continuously refine outreach strategies to adapt to the next generation of eligible families.