



# STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE: MODERNIZING WIC ACCESS WITH REMOTE SERVICE MODELS

## NWA RECOMMENDS:

WIC should permanently allow remote certification models that provide applicants with 90 days flexibility to complete relevant health assessments.

## REDUCING BARRIERS TO WIC ACCESS

WIC's strong record of improving health outcomes and dietary patterns can have even greater impact if a larger share of the eligible population was connected with services. In 2020, USDA estimated that only 50% of eligible participants were enrolled in WIC, with a diminishing share of the eligible child population certified for services until only 25% of eligible four-year-olds are on the program. WIC parents have long cited in-person appointments as a barrier to ongoing retention, as families must navigate transportation challenges, taking time off work, and arranging childcare to make in-person appointments.

WIC's program-wide shift toward remote certifications during COVID-19 had immediate and pronounced impacts. **Nationwide, WIC providers reported a 12% increase in child participation** between the beginning of remote services and fall 2022. Increases in child retention reversed longstanding participation trends by addressing systemic challenges in accessing WIC services.

In fall 2021, NWA and the Nutrition Policy Institute surveyed 26,000 WIC participants across 12 State agencies. More than 80% of respondents stated that remote services reduced pre-existing barriers like transportation. Preserving the convenience of phone and video appointments will be critical in unleashing WIC support for the next generation of participating families.



## COORDINATING WITH HEALTHCARE

Even before COVID-19, WIC providers were efficiently leveraging digital tools and online platforms to deliver nutrition education and breastfeeding support. Remote certifications became more widespread during the pandemic because USDA was able to defer required health screenings, including measuring height/length and weight and taking bloodwork to assess hemoglobin and iron levels.

WIC providers proactively worked to obtain health data and measurements, working with participants, medical providers, and electronic health record systems to populate WIC participants' charts. In the 2021 NWA survey, approximately 60% of WIC participants noted the convenience of sharing measurements obtained at a recent doctor's visit with their WIC counselor. WIC relies on health data to both establish eligibility and inform ongoing nutrition counseling.

With the end of the COVID-19 public health emergency declaration, USDA announced that ongoing State efforts to explore and evaluate remote certifications must restore a health assessment component. Under new flexibilities, USDA would allow applicants to be certified for services, so long as they are able to complete related health assessments within 60 days of the remote appointment. Drawing on WIC providers' experience during COVID-19, there is renewed opportunity for WIC staff to proactively partner with healthcare to coordinate care and reduce duplicative tests.

State WIC agencies and the healthcare sector would benefit from permanent rules changes, which would set the scope for technological innovations to facilitate two-way sharing of relevant health information. Phone and video appointments, coupled with enhanced collaboration with healthcare, will strengthen WIC's reach as the program works to deliver a modern service model consistent with the experience in healthcare settings.

