WIC’S FRUIT AND VEGETABLE BENEFIT: BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR HEALTHIER CHILDREN

NWA RECOMMENDS:
Congress should support swift implementation of WIC’s revised food packages, including uninterrupted increases in WIC’s fruit and vegetable benefit.

PROVEN BOOSTS TO NUTRITION SECURITY

Since spring 2021, WIC has significantly increased monthly fruit and vegetable benefits for over 5 million young children and women. Prior to 2021, WIC’s fruit and vegetable benefit, known as Cash Value Benefit (CVB), was $9–11/month per participant. Current CVB levels are $26/month for children and $47–52/month for pregnant and postpartum participants. These amounts are based on an National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine expert panel recommendation that the CVB should provide 50% of recommended intake per the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

This science-based increase, sustained in fiscal year 2022 and 2023 appropriations, increases access to nutritious foods and builds on WIC’s strong record of improving children’s dietary quality and curbing childhood obesity. USDA is reviewing public comment on its proposed updates to the WIC food packages, which would make this increase permanent. Because WIC is short-term, many current WIC-enrolled women, infants, and children only know the science-based increase amount. Any cuts to the amounts will deeply impact current WIC participants.

Enhanced CVB is associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption.

After the bump was implemented in 2021, a survey of over 10,000 responses from WIC participants toddlers.

found an average increase of 1/4 cup per day in fruit and vegetable consumption for WIC-enrolled children. This increase is consistent with the increases observed when young children are exposed to other types of fruit and vegetable interventions. These shifts promote further alignment between WIC participants’ diets and the DGAs, bringing children closer to dietary targets. Qualitative research from several states found that participants reported a high level of satisfaction with the CVB increase and that it helped participants purchase and consume more fruits and vegetables. A quantitative study of WIC participants from Southern California found that the increased CVB level was associated with greater redemption and variety of fruits and vegetables purchased.

As early childhood is a pivotal time for developing taste preferences, exposure to new fruits and vegetables sets the stage for a lifetime of varied preferences. Thus, the CVB increase is critical not only to current intake but also has an impact long after the period of WIC eligibility. Agencies found an average increase of 1/4 cup per day in fruit and vegetable consumption for WIC-enrolled toddlers. These increases are particularly important given the low levels of fruit and vegetable consumption in early childhood. Approximately half of children age 1-5 do not eat a vegetable daily, and one third do not eat a fruit daily. These

rates are even higher for children living in food insecure households.

Alignment with the DGAs and higher consumption of fruits and vegetables improve child health outcomes. When fruits and vegetables were first added to the WIC food packages, the healthier options contributed to a 9% decline in childhood obesity for WIC-enrolled toddlers. Early nutrition interventions are an effective strategy in reducing chronic diet-related diseases and reducing healthcare expenditures, particularly in Medicare and Medicaid.

CVB increases create an additional $1.4 billion annually in potential revenue for farmers and retailers

Enhanced fruit and vegetable benefits have already increased engagement from producers, distributors, retail grocers, and farmers markets in the WIC space. The CVB remains the most redeemed food category offered in WIC (outside of infant formula), ensuring that increased investment is flowing back up the food supply chain.

The CVB increase is a win-win for WIC families and local economies.