



WIC'S BENEFIT BUMP: INVESTING IN HEALTHY KIDS DURING COVID-19

NWA RECOMMENDS:

Congress should extend the WIC benefit bump for fruits and vegetables through the end of the fiscal year: September 30, 2022.

Since 2009, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has provided a monthly fruit and vegetable benefit to approximately 4.7 million participants nationwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, temporary measures substantially increased this small monthly benefit to nearly triple access to produce for WIC participants.

The WIC fruit and vegetable benefit, known as Cash Value Benefit (CVB), was increased from \$9-11 per month to \$35 per month in summer 2021, before being adjusted in October 2021 to \$24 per month for children, \$43 per month for pregnant and postpartum women, and \$47 for breastfeeding women in the September 30 continuing resolution.

This WIC benefit bump was once again extended in the December 3 continuing resolution, but currently is set to expire on March 31. As Congress approaches an omnibus spending agreement, a longer-term extension of this popular benefit is an effective strategy to support child health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce long-term healthcare costs.



HEALTHY CHOICES FOR KIDS

WIC provides a range of healthy foods to ensure consistent access to key nutrients associated with proper growth and development and align participants' diets with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. WIC's science-based standards result in a strong record of improved pregnancy, birth, and early childhood outcomes.¹

Introducing WIC's CVB for fruits and vegetables WIC in 2009 was associated with increased consumption of nutritious foods by WIC participants, providing greater dietary variety and addressing key nutrient gaps.² CVB demonstrated the program's economic reach, with farmers markets adapting to conduct WIC transactions and low-income communities reported

increasing grocer stocking of fresh produce.³ WIC enhanced access to healthy foods for both participants and entire communities.

Healthier WIC options resulted in improved health outcomes, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recording a nationwide decrease in childhood obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers between 2010 and 2018.⁴ WIC's effective intervention is even more critical during COVID-19, as medical providers are reporting alarming increases in childhood obesity.⁵

The WIC benefit bump is associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption in 2021, with a sample of 10,000 WIC participants recording an average increase of 1/4 cup per day for children.⁶ Increased investment is having an immediate impact and setting the stage for healthier outcomes.



CREATING NEW MARKETS

Since the WIC benefit bump was first rolled out in April 2021, State WIC Agencies have reported significant increases in fruit and vegetable purchases, mirroring the rate of the benefit increase. Of a sample of 29 State WIC Agencies, fruit and vegetable purchases tripled - from monthly averages of \$15.3 million across January to March 2021 to \$48 million across June to August 2021.⁷ Extrapolated these trends to all State WIC Agencies, the WIC benefit bump is projected to increase fruit and vegetable purchases by \$75.1 million each month.

The CVB's versatility ensures that WIC families have consistent access to nutritious fruits and vegetables, even as supply may vary. State WIC Agencies report that families are not only purchasing more fruits and vegetables, but also a greater variety. The WIC benefit bump ensures that higher-cost options are within reach, including pre-sliced produce and different forms of fruits and vegetables, including seasonal fruits, berries, stone fruits, pears, and root vegetables. Parents are empowered to experiment with new varieties, a critical step as children's taste preferences are forming.⁸

The WIC benefit bump stimulates economic activity at every level of the food supply chain, bolstering in-store transactions at a time when COVID-19 is still shaping shopping behaviors. Although the majority of WIC transactions occur at retail grocery stores, several states permit WIC fruit and vegetable benefits to be redeemed at farmers markets or farm stands, strengthening the local farm economy and returning investment directly to local producers.⁹ The WIC benefit bump is especially critical during off-season when other programs - such as WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program - are phased out.

WIC BENEFIT BUMP IS POPULAR

Enhanced value for the WIC benefit greatly improves perceptions about program services. 83 percent of surveyed WIC participants identified the pre-increase benefit for fruits and vegetables as "not enough," but only 26 percent continued to view the WIC benefit as insufficient after the CVB increase was implemented.¹⁰ The WIC benefit bump is a key retention strategy, building on more flexible remote services to sustain a 9 percent increase in participation by children since the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020.¹¹

Support for the WIC benefit bump extends beyond current participants and their families. In September 2021, an independent nationwide poll by McLaughlin & Associates/ALG Research identified broad, bipartisan support for the WIC benefit bump, with 76 percent of likely voters in favor of additional federal investment to provide more nutritious foods to WIC families.¹²

Congress must act to extend the WIC benefit bump through September 30, sustaining a critical nutrition support for over 4.7 million women and children and building on WIC's progress to strengthen nutrition security for the next generation.

¹ National WIC Association (2022) The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation.

² Tester J, Leung C, Crawford P (2016) Revised WIC Food Package and Children's Diet Quality. *Pediatrics*. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-3557>.

³ Hillier A, et al. (2012) The impact of WIC food package changes on access to healthful foods in two low income urban neighborhoods. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 44(3):210-216.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Obesity Among WIC-Enrolled Young Children. <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/obesity-among-wic-enrolled-young-children.html> (last updated May 2021).

⁵ Woolford SJ, Sidell M, Li X (2021) Changes in Body Mass Index Among Children and Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *JAMA* 326(14):1434-1436. <https://doi.org/10.101/jama.2021.15036>.

⁶ National WIC Association (2022) The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ USDA & HHS (2020) Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025, 9th Edition. <https://dietaryguidelines.gov>.

⁹ See USDA/FNS (2018) SFMNP/FMNP Map. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/resource/sfmnpfmnp-map-participating-state-agencies>.

¹⁰ National WIC Association (2022) The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation.

¹¹ See USDA/FNS. WIC Data Tables. <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>.

¹² National WIC Association (2022) The State of WIC: Investing in the Next Generation.