Perspectives on Emerging WIC Priorities

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) delivers nutrition assistance and breastfeeding support to 6.4 million pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to age 5. WIC services have radically shifted since March 2020, adapting to permit remote or modified services during the COVID-19 pandemic. These new flexibilities correlate with participation increases in the majority of State WIC Agencies since February 2020, a notable reversal from the consistent caseload declines reported by State WIC Agencies since 2010.

Throughout the public health emergency, the National WIC Association (NWA) has assessed changing clinic practices resulting from waiver flexibilities, collected input from WIC administrators and providers, and evaluated regulatory barriers to longer-term reforms. These perspectives, presented below, do not reflect the official position of NWA, but inform member-led committees in considering future policy changes to enhance WIC’s public health impacts. These perspectives were compiled based on a survey of State WIC Agency directors conducted in September-October 2020 (n=46) and breakout discussions held at NWA’s two-day Virtual Summit on the Future of WIC in November 2020. Notes from the breakout sessions were reviewed by NWA staff and common themes are presented below. The Virtual Summit included representation from approximately 70 WIC staff from State WIC Agencies, local providers, and State WIC Associations.

Eligibility and Certification

The majority of attendees at the Virtual Summit voiced support for revisiting the income guidelines and assessing steps to make WIC services available regardless of income, with a particular focus on increased access to WIC’s nutrition counseling and breastfeeding support. Particular concern was raised about access for military families, who face a specific set of income guidelines that cause confusion both for eligible families and WIC clinic staff. Attendees cited the special set of income guidelines for military families as a barrier to access. Attendees voiced support for new procedures that would enhance referrals to WIC from Medicaid and SNAP, including unified applications and automatic cross-enrollment. Indian Tribal Organization representatives flagged the importance of building relationships with the Indian Health Service. In a pre-pandemic State Directors Survey conducted in 2018 (n=64), 13 State WIC Agencies reported having taken steps to add additional programs to adjunctive eligibility (beyond Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF) to streamline income screenings, including Head Start, CHIP, FDPIR, CACFP, and the National School Lunch Program.

In the midst of implementing COVID-related waivers, attendees and survey respondents placed increased importance on relaxing physical presence requirements to enable remote certifications in a post-pandemic environment, including by interpreting physical presence to include a virtual consultation. Additional steps will be needed to minimize in-person contact once testing requirements are no longer deferred, and WIC should explore steps to streamline sharing of electronic health information with medical providers and uncouple certification/benefit issuance from health screenings – especially iron screenings.

Remote Appointments and Telehealth

State WIC Agencies had embraced telehealth before the pandemic, and attendees affirmed its ongoing importance to reaching today’s WIC participants. Out of 46 responsive State WIC Agencies, 37 (80%) permitted remote nutrition education before the pandemic and 42 (91%) permitted remote
breastfeeding support before the pandemic. This includes state-driven technology projects, with 32 (70%) agencies having invested in an online nutrition education platform. States reported that additional tools have been used to reach participants during the pandemic, including apps, videoconferencing platforms (i.e., Zoom, GoTo Meetings, MS Teams, Google Meet, etc.), and social media platforms.

Attendees from several states noted a significant drop in the no-show rate since March 2020, indicating higher engagement by families at nutrition touchpoints. Several agencies reported increased attention from participants at remote appointments. Other agencies, particularly rural agencies and Indian Tribal Organizations, noted challenges with WiFi access for both participants and clinic staff. Attendees recommended that NWA convene a task force on clinic-oriented technologies to support further progress in embracing telehealth.

As a result of the FY 2020 appropriations bill, 34 out of 46 agencies (74%) reported a higher Breastfeeding Peer Counselor grant. This has resulted in expanded peer counselor coverage and the creation of new peer counselor positions, particularly in rural agencies. Attendees encouraged strengthening professional development opportunities for peer counselors, noting the straight pathway for peer counselors to obtain credentialing as lactation consultants.

**Food Package and Cost Containment**

USDA has not yet acted to implement changes to the WIC food packages recommended by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) in an independent scientific review published in January 2017. Attendees noted that participant concerns were often related to the food package, including concerns about flexibility/choice and the perceived low value of the food benefit. State policies concerning lowest-cost brand were also cited as a participant concern. State WIC Agencies attending the Virtual Summit raised concerns about the sustainability of infant formula cost containment, noting the higher levels of rebates secured in recent years.

**WIC Redemptions at Retail Grocery Stores**

Attendees affirmed the importance of electronic-benefit transfer (EBT)/e-WIC in navigating the pandemic, even though they reiterated the cost of operating EBT/e-WIC systems continues to run at about twice the costs of operating a paper voucher system. Attendees noted the increased challenges of SNAP technology advancements, including the SNAP online purchasing pilot. 23 out of 46 agencies (50%) reported that WIC redemptions were lower than seasonal trends would otherwise indicate. 36 out of 46 responsive agencies (78%) cautioned that additional economic supports – including heightened SNAP benefits and the introduction of Pandemic-EBT – were affecting redemption of WIC benefits. Other agencies cited shortages of WIC-approved foods, with 37 agencies (80%) noting challenges in the initial weeks of the pandemic and 11 agencies (24%) reporting ongoing challenges in October 2020.

Attendees urged NWA to proactively push USDA for swift, national solutions to online shopping, while also raising concerns about the impacts of delivery or convenience fees on WIC families. 32 agencies (70%) were actively exploring their own projects to improve the shopping experience, including efforts to enhance self checkout and permit phone or online ordering coupled with in-store or curbside pickup. Attendees cautioned about embracing only technology solutions, noting that resolving challenges to the in-person shopping experience will remain critical. 18 agencies (39%) have established in-person supports at retail grocery locations, including “shopper helper” or vendor liaison programs.