WIC is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.

WIC is a 100 percent federally funded nutrition and health program that provides education and food. Most WIC families are employed with incomes at or below 185 percent of the poverty level (currently $42,642 for a family of four). In addition, participants are nutritionally at-risk pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants and children up to the fifth birthday.

The program is designed to provide temporary assistance during those brief periods in life which can become more challenging: during pregnancy, the birth of a newborn or having a young child with nutrition and/or health conditions. WIC responds with nutritious food, parenting and nutrition education, support for breastfeeding mothers and babies, referrals for services needed by the family, and requirements for medical care to continue participation.

The WIC Program has earned the reputation of being one of the most successful federally funded nutrition programs in the United States. The results of studies conducted by non-government entities prove that WIC is one of the nation’s most successful and cost effective nutrition intervention programs. Studies also show that women who participated in the program during their pregnancies incurred lower Medicaid costs for themselves and their babies than did women who did not participate.
WIC in California (CA) is a program of the Department of Public Health which administers contracts with 84 local agencies—half local governments and half private, non-profit community organizations—which operate WIC centers in 650 locations statewide. Approximately 3,000 local WIC staff members assess and document program eligibility based on residency, income, and health or nutrition risk, and issue 6 million food checks each month. Each check is valid for a 30-day period and is payable for a specific type and quantity of food. The retail value of the checks, a direct infusion into the California economy, is about $63 per month per participant or $1.1 billion per year.

**WIC Food Instruments**

WIC checks can be redeemed at any of the over 5,500 grocery stores statewide that have entered into vendor agreements with the WIC Program. Stores may charge WIC their shelf prices for the foods purchased up to a maximum allowable amount calculated for each peer group and updated every two weeks.

**Dairy and Alternatives**
- Cow Milk (including evaporated & powdered), Soy Milk, Tofu, Cheese, Infant Formula

**Whole Grains**
- Bread, Whole Wheat and Corn Tortillas, Brown Rice, Oatmeal, Bulgur, Barley, Ready-to-eat Cereals

**Fruits & Vegetables**
- Fresh, Frozen, Canned, Dried (fruits only); Concentrated & Bottled Juice

**Meat & Alternatives**
- Legumes, Peanut Butter, Eggs, Infant Meats, Canned Fish

**Funding**

WIC is not an entitlement program for which Congress sets aside funds to serve every eligible individual. Rather, WIC is a discretionary program operating under a capped grant administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) for which Congress appropriates a specific amount of funds annually. CA WIC supplements this allocation with formula manufacturer rebates.

The Nutrition Services & Administration (NSA) grant pays for:
- Staffing, direct nutrition and breastfeeding services, program operations;
- Maintenance of the mainframe database systems for participants and vendors;
- Establishment of program standards in compliance with state and federal regulations;
- Program monitoring to ensure compliance with standards;
- Distribution of required materials and forms;
- Processing of vendor applications and requests for payment;
- Provision of reports to USDA, local programs and vendors.

**Program Integrity & Quality Assurance**

CA WIC exceeds federal regulations to conduct quality assurance, which includes review of local agencies and compliance activities at authorized stores. Monitoring occurs on-site which leads to further investigation at approximately 15 percent of authorized stores each year. California WIC also employs Program Integrity staff with responsibilities for training and for follow-up on reports of program abuse and fraud pertaining to participants, local agency staff and authorized food vendors.
WIC benefits will become electronic

The current California WIC food benefit process is enormously paper intense. Approximately 241,440 WIC Food Instruments (FIs) are issued each day in California. The FIs are issued at WIC Local Agencies statewide, redeemed at over 5,500+ authorized WIC Vendors, and submitted to State Treasurer’s Office (STO) for payment. Each weekday, STO processes an average of 235,000 FIs, or over 4.8 million a month.

An alternative to the issuance and redemption of paper FIs is the use of electronic payment and card technologies in issuing food benefits, and in the processing and settlement of WIC benefit transactions. These technologies, when applied to the delivery of government benefits, are referred to as Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT). During the 1990’s, other states began planning and developing an EBT system for WIC food benefit issuance known as eWIC. With significant progress being made in other states, it is now time to begin the planning process to evaluate the viability of eWIC for California. Additionally, the passing of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 includes provisions that State agencies must implement an EBT system by October 1, 2020. With the support of the California Department of Public Health, eWIC may be available as soon as 2014.

Non Discrimination Statement

“In accordance with Federal law and U.S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TTY). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.”

Recent California WIC Accomplishments

The CA WIC Program is nationally recognized for its innovative services to the families it serves. Over the past decade, the Program has received numerous USDA Special Project grants and other funding to test and document successful WIC program initiatives and best practices:

**Participant-Centered Education:** A UC Berkeley study conducted in 2005 established that CA WIC participants who received nutrition education about fruits and vegetables using participant-centered learning techniques were more likely to eat more vegetables and to improve related eating behaviors. New practices included: starting a garden, replacing visits to fast food outlets with servings of fresh fruits and vegetables, and increasing the variety of produce offered to their families.

**“Healthy Habits” Nutrition Education:** In 2009, CA WIC changed its food package to include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat milk for adults and children starting at two years of age. A statewide 6-month campaign prepared participants for the new WIC foods by promoting healthy eating habits while a study surveyed 3,000 CA WIC participants both before and after the campaign. This research documented the success of nutrition education in improving participants’ consumption of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat milk, even before these foods became available through the food package changes.

**CA WIC’s Healthy New Food Packages:** The research described above continued in 2010 by surveying WIC participants six months after changing to the new foods. This study documented that WIC’s nutrition education campaign combined with access to healthy foods using WIC checks resulted in improved consumption of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and lower-fat milk, beyond the improvements observed with nutrition education alone.

**WIC Breastfeeding Success:** Policy improvements in CA WIC have improved support for WIC mothers who decide that they want to breastfeed. These policy changes include:
- Significantly enhancing the foods available to the breastfeeding mother and baby to encourage exclusive breastfeeding and implementing measures to delay the introduction of formula to breastfed infants for one month;
- Providing immediate breastfeeding assistance to mother and baby in the first 30 days of life in person or by phone with counseling by lactation experts;
- A six-fold increase in the number of breastfeeding peer counselors available in WIC to new mothers and a similar increase in the number of trained lactation professionals in WIC centers throughout the state;
- Instituting a statewide Baby Behavior campaign educating parents on newborn infant sleep and crying patterns to reduce overfeeding.

These initiatives have increased California WIC’s breastfeeding initiation from 55.5% in 2004 to 61.1% in 2012; the rates of WIC infants who are fully breastfed at 2 and 3 months rose from 14.2% to 25.9% in the same period. Successful initiation and increased duration of breastfeeding contributes to improved immunology, improved oral health, reduced risk of chronic disease for mother and infant and reduced likelihood of overweight for the child.

For more information
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Websites
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CA WIC Association: www.calwic.org
USDA Food & Nutrition Service, WIC: www.usda.fns.gov/wic
National WIC Association: www.nwica.org