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Great News for One Million California Infants, Children and Parents as USDA Proposes New Food Options

WIC plays a significant role in reducing health and food access disparities

WEST SACRAMENTO, Calif., (November 17) – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) took a significant step today which will have lasting impacts for one million California infants, children, and their parents, by calling for updates to the foods provided in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a program that has proven to support the nutritional needs for low-income families.

USDA is looking to permanently codify improvements to the foods provided to families, including the April 2021 fruit and vegetable benefit increase and a number of other science-based recommendations aligned with the Dietary Guidelines of Americans (DGAs). Proposed new regulations would also permit a broader range of food package sizes to offer participants a greater choice without sacrificing priority nutrients, which is especially important during critical periods of a child's development. All interested parties are encouraged to provide feedback on the proposed changes by visiting www.regulations.gov. The comment period will be open from November 21, 2022 – February 21, 2023.

“It is essential that the USDA not only permanently extend the critical allowance for WIC families to purchase more fruits and vegetables, but also boost the overall value of the WIC food package to put more culturally appropriate and healthy foods into families' shopping bags.” said Karen Farley, RDN, IBCLC, executive director of the California WIC Association (CWA). “WIC foods improve health outcomes in our most vulnerable communities and allow children to thrive.”

Before the fruit and vegetable benefit increase was implemented as a response to COVID-19 hardships, fruit and vegetable benefits were set at \$9 per month for children and \$11 per month for parents. If this benefit increase is permanently approved, participants could receive 3-4 times this amount, leading to greater investments in nutrition security for program participants. Under the 2021 benefits increase, the purchases of fruits and vegetables by California WIC participants increased by about \$10 million each month over previous funding levels. [Studies have shown](#) that there is a significant decrease in childhood obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers and families and [healthier eating patterns](#), including increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lower-fat dairy products.

“What I like about the benefit is that it gives you a variety of options, especially now that my son is four,” said Amy, a California mother benefiting from the expanded WIC program. “It has allowed us to get a wider range of fruits and veggies instead of being limited to what we used before.”

Support for the WIC benefit increase and support for nutrition for young families extends beyond current participants and their families. In September 2021, an independent nationwide poll by McLaughlin & Associates and ALG Research identified strong, bipartisan support for what is known as the “WIC benefit bump,” with 76% of likely voters in favor of additional federal investment to provide more nutritious foods to WIC families. The science-based funding increase also reflects issuance levels recommended by the National Academies of Sciences that constitute 50 percent of recommended fruit and vegetable intake.

In addition to maintaining current healthy foods funding for WIC, the USDA proposes WIC food package updates including allowing for package size variety – for items such as for whole-wheat breads and yogurts – which mean participants will have more nutritious options. This will also reduce the burden on retailers and manufacturers by reducing the need for “WIC-only” sizes. These flexibilities would also enhance the shopping experience.

The USDA proposal supports the [White House National Strategy](#) to strengthen access to healthy nutrition, address hunger and improve population health outcomes, especially for chronic diseases.

“Improvements to the WIC food package are a must for families. A third of all children in Fresno are in poverty, and families are struggling with inflation, transportation, and food access,” said Annette Thornton, RD, WIC Program Director for the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission. “Not only is it necessary to increase the WIC benefit value, we also need more options in foods, package sizes, and online shopping to reduce barriers in feeding our children, especially in rural communities.”

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About the California WIC Association:

CWA, a non-profit organization since 1992, is the member association for the 84 California WIC local agencies. Supporting the mission of the Supplemental Nutrition Program for WIC, Infants and Children (WIC), CWA provides leadership through issues education and advocacy, trainings and professional development, communications and policy briefs.