



# WIC Especially Critical during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Voices of Participants in Los Angeles County

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## Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) delivers services to pregnant and postpartum women and children up to age 5 years old living in under-resourced households. With authorization from Congress, the USDA granted states multiple waivers to allow flexibility in WIC operations during the pandemic.

Thanks to these adaptations, in California, participants are not required to be physically present at WIC clinics to enroll and re-certify, remote methods of delivering nutrition education have been expanded, and the list of approved WIC foods was temporarily expanded to over additional options.

Implementation of these changes provides not only critical flexibilities to serve families in need, it also provides a unique window of opportunity to gather information from WIC participants to inform innovations to improve the WIC program and participant experience and to ensure that women and children receive the proven health benefits of WIC.

**In June-July 2020, we interviewed 60 WIC participants in the greater Los Angeles area to understand the impact of changes to WIC operations in response to the pandemic, and identify unmet needs.**

This brief shares key lessons learned, with illustrative quotes from WIC participants. The findings are intended to inform local WIC agencies, states, USDA and other organizations serving WIC-eligible populations.

Additional briefs will be released in early 2021 after interviews with WIC participants in other regions of California and with WIC local agency directors have been conducted.



## About our study participants<sup>1</sup>

Most (82%) of the interviewees had been participating in WIC prior to the pandemic. The remainder enrolled in WIC during the pandemic for the first time (8%) or after a lapse in participation (10%). The majority of interviewees identified as Hispanic/Latino (88%), and most (77%) had completed at least a high school education.

## What we learned

**WIC has been essential in helping families cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.**

- The pandemic has clearly exacerbated the challenges facing under-resourced families.
- WIC continues to be a valued resource for families, and interviewees expressed gratitude for the program - especially under the challenging circumstances.
- WIC's successful transition to remote delivery has ensured that families with young children continue to receive not only critical WIC food benefits, but also nutrition education and support to navigate especially difficult times.
- Lessons learned during COVID-19 can also inform needed WIC modernizations going forward to maximize WIC's proven benefits post-pandemic.

**The pandemic is compounding economic challenges already faced by families with inadequate resources.**

- Nearly 75% of WIC participants interviewed faced reductions in income due to lost jobs or reduced work hours.
- Participants coped by seeking family help, cutting other expenditures, and taking on debt.

*"We stopped paying the gas, the light, and the car, and the phone bill."*

**The pandemic has affected participants' physical and emotional health.**

- Over half of participants found it difficult for their families to be physically active due to pandemic restrictions.
- One in four struggled with access to medical care.
- Over 40% were dealing with disruptions in childcare and school closures.
- Several participants reported social isolation and additional stress; 25-30% exhibited signs of depression.<sup>2</sup>

*"They were used to always going to the park...where children could play. But ever since COVID started I have been unable to take them anywhere...It's difficult for the children to be in the house."*

*"She [4 year old] would release some of her energy at school...and for now just having her home all day long it's been very stressful. I seem to be more stressed out, so I release my stress on her, which is so unfair. "*

*“(WIC) is a lot of help, especially during this COVID and my husband working less hours. They help provide us with...milk, cheese, eggs, cereal. Something ...that we would have to spend on (if didn't have WIC).”*

*“Thanks to WIC, my household has been able to move forward, since they take such a huge weight off our shoulders... So I'm just really grateful for a WIC. It really, really helps my family through these tough times.”*

## The pandemic has caused new food-related challenges for WIC families

- Especially early in the pandemic, **many reported challenges accessing WIC-eligible foods**, particularly milk and eggs, **resulting in lost food benefits**.

*“Especially in the beginning...(WIC foods) were just not in stock and my (benefits) were set to expire within the next couple of days...So I just had to forfeit those (benefits).”*

- Approximately 43% reported getting food from a food pantry or church since the pandemic began; for most (77%) this was the first time they had relied on charitable foods.
- Nearly 60% of households reported issues with food insecurity in the month prior to the interview.<sup>3</sup>
- Interviewees also voiced concerns about exposure to COVID-19 while shopping for food and challenges relying on public transportation to get to grocery stores.

## WIC successfully adapted to support families during the pandemic.

- Participants reported that enrolling in WIC remotely was easy – easier than coming in-person and easier than enrolling in other assistance programs. Among the new enrollees interviewed, all said that they were comfortable providing documents remotely.

*“They made it really easy over the phone and everybody was really nice and helpful.”*

## WIC's transition to using multiple modalities for delivering nutrition education was very helpful. Participants shared that even with the change to only remote education, they valued the information and were very satisfied with the services.

- During the pandemic, most (82%) had received information from WIC by text, 77% by phone call, 33% online, and 21% by email.
- Respondents varied in their preference for mode of receiving information remotely, suggesting that giving WIC participants options moving forward is beneficial.

*“Honestly, I have been having a great experience through texting, they always seem to reply really fast and whenever I need to change something from my daughter's milk or any change in general, I'd send them a text and they reply within minutes.”*

## Electronic benefit cards (WIC Cards) and the CA WIC App made accessing WIC benefits easier during the pandemic.

- By the time of the interviews, all WIC agencies in California were issuing food benefits electronically using WIC cards.<sup>4</sup>
- California WIC developed a WIC App for participants to get information about their WIC benefits. The majority of interviewees (85%) had successfully downloaded the WIC App to their phone, **83% found the WIC App helpful to inform what WIC foods can be purchased, and all were very (90%) or somewhat (10%) satisfied with the App**.
- Only a few Spanish-speaking participants mentioned challenges downloading the App and a few respondents reported the App was sometimes slow.
- The few participants who had suggestions for improving the WIC App suggested adding information, such as on the availability of WIC appointments and on the expanded WIC food options.
- Relatively few participants (12%) were aware of these additional food options.
- Overall, participants expressed that the use of the WIC card along with the App made shopping substantially easier than before.

*“It (WIC App) makes it easier for me when I go to stores. I just take out my phone and I am able to see what food I am able to buy. Especially using the scan on the WIC app to double check if it (food item) is eligible.”*

*“I felt more confident, going to a regular grocery store with the app and the card than I did with the checks previously.”*

**Footnotes:** <sup>1</sup> A total of 200 participants were randomly selected from administrative records at PHFE-WIC, the largest local agency WIC program in the country, serving about 20% of all participants in California. Of these 110 were invited to participate to an interview by text. Research staff then called interested participants until 60 interviews were complete, half by English-speaking and half by Spanish-speaking women. Among interview participants, all were women, 88% were Hispanic, 77% had completed high school or higher education, 70% were on MediCal, 27% were participating in SNAP, 17% received Pandemic-EBT, and 5% were receiving TANF. <sup>2</sup> Based on responses to the Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2). <sup>3</sup> Among the WIC participants interviewed, 58% were food insecure based on responses to two questions from the USDA Food Security Module. <sup>4</sup> Prior to COVID-19, the USDA required all states, intertribal organization and territories to transition to using WIC cards by October 2020.

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