

## WIC App Modifications Needed to Improve WIC Participants' Shopping Experience

Policy Brief • October 2024

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides supplemental food, nutrition education and referrals to over 6.7 million U.S. women, infants and children with low-income and who are at nutrition risk. WIC saves \$2.48 in public costs for every dollar spent by improving participants' health outcomes. 1,2 Purchases made with WIC electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards boost local economies by funneling billions of dollars into the retail sector and food systems. 3-5

WIC food packages are tailored to participants' nutrition needs and were revised in June 2024 to include more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, reduced added sugars, and enhanced flexibility in food choices and package sizes. WIC transitioned from paper-checks to EBT cards by 2022 and many states offer WIC shopping guides through smartphone applications instead of paper booklets.

However, persistent shopping challenges—including difficulties finding WIC-approved foods despite guidance from the WIC app and retail shelf tags—contribute to unspent WIC benefits and may contribute to WIC participant attrition.<sup>7-10</sup> Studies suggest only 19-74% of WIC food benefits are fully redeemed.<sup>5,8</sup> In 2022, only 54% of those eligible participated in WIC.<sup>11</sup> It is crucial to improve the shopping experience to enhance WIC participants' agency and benefit utilization, especially as the updated WIC food package is being implemented.

### RECOMMENDATION

Improve the WIC app to better align its information with vendor systems, improving users' ability to identify and purchase WIC-approved items efficiently.

## EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THIS RECOMMENDATION

This recommendation was informed by findings from a 2023 <u>survey</u> of 38,621 WIC participants—81% English and 19% Spanish speakers—from 19 states, one Indian Tribal Organization, and one US territory. This brief also includes results from focus groups held in April and May 2024 with 44 WIC participants from 16 states and one Indian Tribal Organization.

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

### Participants experience difficulties shopping for WIC foods.

Most surveyed participants (90%) reported experiencing one or more difficulties when shopping for WIC foods. The most common problem was difficulty finding WIC foods (73%). Other common issues included misalignment between items labeled WIC-approved and what could be purchased at the register (64%), not having the right WIC foods when at the register (62%), and not being able to use curbside pickup for WIC foods (31%).



"The WIC shopper app, it's really helpful, but sometimes, it will say, "Yeah, that's a WIC item." But you get to the register. And they're like, "Oh, no, it's not."

- English-speaking WIC participant







## Shoppers' top reasons for not buying all their WIC foods were running out of time and not being able to find WIC foods.

Surveyed WIC participants reported many reasons for not fully utilizing their WIC benefits. The top reasons included:



ran out of time before their benefits expired



could not find WIC foods

### The WIC app helped with shopping, but improvements are needed.

Focus group participants said the WIC app generally helped improve their experience finding WIC approved items and checking out, but the approved foods in the app did not always align with what was approved for purchase at the register.

"If I didn't have the app, it would really be total chaos at checkout."
- Spanish-speaking WIC participant



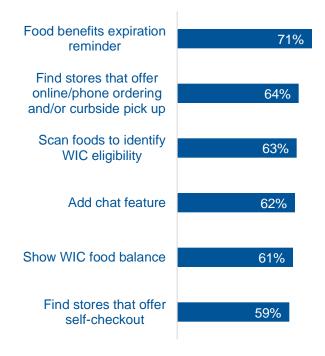
"In the store, they'll have it labeled as a WIC item. But then I go to scanning in my app, and my app tells me that it's not qualified."

- English-speaking WIC participant

# Participants recommend several changes to the WIC app to support full benefit redemption.

The main suggested changes to the WIC app from survey respondents included the addition of features that would help with WIC food shopping, such as food benefits expiration reminder, preordering and/or curbside pickup store locator, and a scan feature to identify WIC eligibility.

#### 2023 WIC Survey Respondents Desired App Changes



**Acknowledgements:** This work was funded by the National WIC Association through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Thank you to the state WIC agencies and WIC participants for their participation in this study.

Suggested Citation: Lee DL, Felix C, Fiedler K, Oropeza R, Rangel J, Kim L, Machell G, Ritchie LD. Policy Brief: WIC App Modifications Needed to Improve WIC Participants' Shopping Experience. Nutrition Policy Institute, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources. Pepperdine University. National WIC Association. October 2024.

References: [1] Caulfield LE, et al. Maternal and Child Outcomes Associated With the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Rockville (MD): Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (US); 2022 Apr. [2] Nianogo RA, et al. Economic evaluation of California prenatal participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to prevent preterm birth. *Prev Med.* 2019 Jul;124:42-49. [3] Hanson K, et. al. Economic Linkages Between the WIC Program and the Farm Sector. US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. Economic Brief No. 12. March 2009. National WIC Association. How WIC Positively Impacts Local Communities. February 2017. [4] Nueberger Z, et. al. WIC's Critical Benefits Reach Only Half of Those Eligible. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. 21 February 2024. [5] Li X, et al. The Magnitude and Determinants of Partial Redemptions of Food Benefits in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). *Am J Health Promot.* 2021 Jul;35(6):775-783. [6] US Department of Agriculture. Final Rule: Revisions in the WIC Food Packages (2024). 18 April 2024. [7] Zhang Q, et al. App Usage Associated with Full Redemption of WIC Food Benefits: A Propensity Score Approach. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2021 Sep;53(9):779-786. [8] Vercammen K, et al. A Descriptive Analysis of Redemption Patterns by Vendor Type Among: WIC Participants in Massachusetts. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2023 Apr;123(4):626-636.e2. [9] Chauvenet C, et al. WIC Recipients in the Retail Environment: A Qualitative Study Assessing Customer Experience and Satisfaction. *J Acad Nutr Diet.* 2019 Mar;119(3):416-424.e2.[10] US Department of Agriculture. National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and Program Reach in 2022. 23 August 2024. [11] National WIC Association. 2023 WIC Multi-State Participant Satisfaction Survey. 9 April 2024. [12] Fiedler K, et. al. Facilitated by social support, challenged by shopping barriers: qualitative research e