

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) provides federal grants to states for food assistance, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant and postpartum women, as well as infants and children up to age five who are found to be at nutritional risk.¹ State health departments nationwide administer WIC and programs are often times found in hospitals, clinics, schools and community centers.²

WIC PROVIDES NEEDED NUTRITION TO LOW INCOME WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The WIC program provides a monthly food prescription that is aligned with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans for eligible women and children.³ This prescription supplements the nutritional needs of participants and supports access to important nutrition during critical periods of growth and development during pregnancy, infancy and early childhood. WIC also provides nutrition education that is specific to participant needs and promotes healthy eating habits. Participants learn healthy habits that can carry on well past their time on the WIC program.

For a participant to be eligible they need to meet income requirements and receive not more than 185% of poverty (just over \$36,000 for family of three)⁴ or be enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Family Program (TANF).⁵ Participants also need to be at nutrition risk. Nutrition risk means that an individual may have a medical or dietary based condition such as being underweight, have a history of poor pregnancy outcomes or a poor diet. A WIC clinic or other healthcare providers, such as a family physician, can determine nutritional risk.⁶

WIC's success is based partially on the fact that the program depends on research and science-based information to determine which foods can most improve and supplement the diets of women and children by providing foods that are noticeably absent from their current diets.

IMPORTANT EDUCATION AND HEALTH RESOURCES FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN

WIC provides new mothers help from lactation consultants so that all mothers have the opportunity to successfully breast-feed and their children can reap the numerous health benefits and maternal bonding that breast-feeding provides.⁷ Lactation consultants are often times peers that connect with the women and provide them with support and assistance. There also is a hotline available for women who have questions about breast-feeding. The WIC program also provides formula in the instance that mothers are not able to breast-feed.

WIC also connects women and children to important health care providers. For women this may be an obstetrician for prenatal care or after birth for help with post-partum depression. For children it may mean gaining access to dental care or obtaining access to important immunizations and check-ups.

According to various research conducted by USDA and others, the WIC program is successful in providing many important health improvements to women and children.⁸ These include, but are not limited to, improved birth outcomes and savings in health care costs, improved diet and diet-related outcomes and improved immunization rates and access to regular medical care. In addition for every dollar spent on a pregnant woman in the WIC program, up to \$4.21 is saved in Medicaid for her and her newborn baby because WIC reduces the risk for preterm birth and low birth-weight babies by 25% and 44%, respectively.⁹

FULLY FUNDING WIC IS CRITICAL FOR OUR NATION'S FUTURE

WIC is a discretionary program and therefore is funded by Congress each year through the annual appropriations process. This means that Congress must make the decision to fund all eligible participants each year. If participation or food costs unexpectedly rise, USDA must have an adequate contingency fund available to cover all eligible women and children. If there is increased participation, higher food cost, or in the event of a government shutdown, contingency funds may not be enough to cover all eligible participants and states would then be forced to wait list participants. At that point WIC administrators must prioritize eligible individuals and many times older children or post-partum women could be left without nutrition assistance. Therefore it is important that Congress fully funds the WIC program and provides a strong contingency fund every year.

This year the WIC program celebrates its 40th anniversary. Over the last 40 years WIC has functioned successfully as a federal nutrition assistance program, improving health and birth outcomes for women and children. It is important that WIC is able to reach all eligible women and children so that every child can gain access to a healthy start in life.

NOTES

¹ “Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).” *Food and Nutrition Service*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 28 Feb. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

² “WIC State Agencies-alphabetical.” *WIC State Agencies-alphabetical*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 27 Sept. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

³ “Women, Infants and Children (WIC).” *Final Rule: Revisions in the WIC Food Packages*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 5 Mar. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

⁴ “Women, Infants and Children (WIC).” *WIC Income Eligibility Guidelines 2013-2014*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 20 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

⁵ “Women, Infants and Children (WIC).” *WIC Eligibility Requirements*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 22 Jan. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Why It's Important to Support Breast Feeding.” *Nwica.org/breastfeeding_infographic2013*. National WIC Association, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

⁸ “Women, Infants and Children (WIC).” *About WIC- How WIC Helps*. The United States Department of Agriculture, 18 Nov. 2013. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.

⁹ “WIC: Solid Returns on Investment While Reducing the Deficit.” *WIC Return on Investment*. The National WIC Association, Nov. 2011. Web. 10 Mar. 2014.