

Securing the Health of U.S. Preschoolers by Extending the WIC Safety Net

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What is WIC?

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), serves pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and children up to five years of age who are low income, and at nutritional risk. WIC serves working families. Participants must have incomes equal to or less than 185% of the poverty level.¹ The WIC program has shown to be a cost effective method for improving health status of low income women, infants, and children.

WIC participants receive nutrition education, breastfeeding support and referrals to other support services, in addition to vouchers for healthy foods. The foods offered through WIC contain nutrients that have been found to be lacking in the diets of the population WIC serves and are needed to help participants meet their

nutritional needs during critical periods of growth and development. All WIC participants are assessed by WIC nutrition staff for health focused risk factors and assigned nutritious WIC foods based on their needs. Data from Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2015 showed WIC served 8 million participants, including 4.16 million children between 1-5 years old, each receiving monthly benefits.² Monthly food vouchers differ between participant categories, with women and children receiving nutrient rich items such as milk, cheese, eggs, whole grains, fruits and vegetables. WIC services have been linked to many positive health outcomes, including lower incidence of premature and low birth weight babies, lower incidence of anemia, improved immunization rates, and improved nutrition leading to healthier growth.³

Why Expand WIC?

Since being established in 1974, WIC has been providing services for children up to a child's fifth birthday. At age five, some children may be eligible to attend kindergarten the following school year and may begin to participate in the federally assisted school meal program. However, some five year olds do not qualify for kindergarten because their birthdays fall after the official cut-off dates set by states or districts. This gap leaves low-income five year olds without nutrition services and vital nutrients for as long as a year during a critical period of growth and development.⁴

"Some five year olds do not qualify for kindergarten because their birthdays fall after the official cut-off dates set by states or districts."

The expansion of WIC to age six has the potential to continue reducing disparities in the following areas:

Food Security

Food insecurity refers to having limited or uncertain access to adequate amounts of food.⁵ One in five US households with children is food insecure.⁶ Food insecurity is associated with inadequate intake of important nutrients, deficits in cognitive development, behavioral problems, and poor health.⁷ WIC's provision of supplemental healthy foods helps to combat food insecurity and research has shown that WIC substantially reduces the prevalence of food insecurity in participating households.⁸ According to 2015 data, of the 23 million children under the age of six in the United States, 23 percent are living below the federal poverty level and 45 percent are living in low income families (at 200% of the federal poverty level).⁹



2017 POVERTY GUIDELINES FOR THE 48 CONTIGUOUS STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

Table 1.

Persons in Family/Household	Poverty Guideline
1	\$12,060
2	\$16,240
3	\$20,420
4	\$24,600
5	\$28,780

Healthy Diets

Nutrition influences health across the life span, prenatally through childhood and into adult life. WIC supports nutritious diets as evidenced by the provision of nutrient rich items. Studies comparing the diets of participating WIC eligible children and those eligible but not participating show improved growth, decreased prevalence of anemia, and increased intakes of essential vitamins and minerals.¹⁰

School Readiness

Good nutrition is especially important to young children as cognitive development occur most rapidly during this time.¹⁰

Many studies have shown that children in stable home environments have fewer behavioral problems, higher educational accomplishments, and are more productive employees later in life.¹¹ Stress, such as that experienced by lack of access to healthy foods and a chaotic home environment, affects brain and body development. Children experiencing these realities concentrate less and think less critically therefore scoring lower on tests and having less success later in life.¹⁰

Expanding WIC to age six is a key component of resolving these gaps at a time of critical growth and development and increases the likelihood of success when a child is officially able to enter the structured learning and meal environment within the federal education system.

*"...By expanding WIC to age six we close that gap and ensure children have a strong health and nutrition foundation. **No child should be placed at a nutritional disadvantage simply because of when their birthdate falls.**"*

Rosa DeLauro (D-CT)

Possible Outcomes of Extension

Increased Costs

Costs are important factors to consider when discussing program expansion. WIC spends approximately \$765 a year on each participant, of which \$504 (\$42/month) is attributed to providing healthy foods.^{13, 14} WIC is grant funded for an amount determined by Congress each year and therefore does not serve the entire eligible population. An additional \$784,125,000 annually would need to be allocated to WIC to continue providing services for the additional year to the roughly 1,025,000 children that age out of the program each year.

Far Reaching Economics

WIC's impact goes beyond its participants by supporting local businesses and improving everyone's access to healthy foods. There are 47,000 WIC authorized retailers nationwide, ranging from large grocery stores to neighborhood corner stores.¹⁵ Being a WIC authorized vendor helps bring business to stores, especially helping to maintain smaller stores that may be impacted by nearby big businesses or gentrification of neighborhoods.

WIC authorized retailers are held to strict regulations and are required to keep product minimums on their shelves. Studies have shown that the 2007 WIC food package revisions have increased intake of low fat dairy, whole grains,

fruits and vegetables in WIC families while also increasing the availability, variety, quality, and affordability of healthy foods in the food retail environment, especially in low income areas.¹⁶

Decreased Childhood Obesity and Health Care Costs

Research indicates that a child who begins kindergarten overweight is four times more likely to become obese.¹⁸ In the US, 8.9% of our children 2-5 years old are already classified as obese on the Body Mass Index (equal to or greater than the 95th percentile).¹⁷ With childhood overweight and obesity and its associated chronic diseases continuing to be a global health crisis, it is important to continue with interventions that have had positive results. New CDC/NHANES data showed a significant decline in early childhood obesity—the only age group with such an improvement.⁴ Another study showed a decrease in obesity trends for preschool aged children in New York and California, which is being attributed to interventions by national nutrition programs that offer nutrition education along with healthy foods, such as WIC.¹⁸

Expanding the WIC program to include five year olds provides an additional year of healthy foods and nutrition education which may help improve obesity trends and have a lasting impact on our nation's health and the strain on the health care system.

Recommendations

Expansion of the WIC program to include children up to six years old is vitally important to improving our children's health. WIC has been shown to decrease health disparities, increase school readiness, and improve health outcomes all by helping participants meet their dietary needs. This additional year of WIC helps at risk food insecure families by bridging the gap to the school meal program, at a time of early development when access to nutritious food and healthy eating habits are critical. Extending the program helps to accomplish national goals as it creates an even more solid and continuous foundation of good health for children of all backgrounds to properly develop in order to attain longer, healthier and higher-quality lives. The cost of expansion outweighs the future costs that would be seen from lost productivity and poor health outcomes.

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Table 1: ASPE. "U.S. Federal Poverty Guidelines Used to Determine Financial Eligibility for Certain Federal Programs." Jan 2017. Retrieved from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>