

## POSITION STATEMENT:

# Permanently Increase WIC's Cash Value Benefit for Fruit and Vegetable Purchases

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## SUMMARY STATEMENT

The Society of Behavioral Medicine supports a permanent increase in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children's (WIC) cash value benefit (CVB) for fruit and vegetable purchases through revision of the WIC Food Package.

## THE PROBLEM

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is the largest public health nutrition assistance program reaching nearly half of all babies born in the United States.<sup>[1,2]</sup> The WIC program provides supplemental food and beverages (WIC food package) to women who are pregnant, postpartum and/or breastfeeding, as well as infants and children up to age five who are nutritionally at risk and living in or near poverty.<sup>[2]</sup>

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) recommends that Americans consume diets rich in fruits and vegetables<sup>[3]</sup>; yet, the majority (80-90%) of Americans do not meet these guidelines.<sup>[3,4]</sup> Under-consumption of fruits and vegetables is more common among people/households with incomes below the federal poverty level or those from under-resourced communities.<sup>[5-9]</sup>

In 2009, WIC implemented its first substantial revision to the allowable supplemental foods and beverages since its authorization in 1972.<sup>[10]</sup> Revisions significantly shifted available WIC foods to align with food and beverage patterns in the DGAs. A component of the revised WIC food package was a monthly cash value benefit (CVB) that participants could use to purchase allowable fruits and vegetables. The CVB amount was \$9 per month for children and \$11 per month for women. Although CVB redemption has been associated with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables by WIC participants<sup>[10-12]</sup>, increasing the amount allotted may optimize full use of WIC nutrition programming.<sup>[13]</sup>

In 2017, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) recommended that the USDA



increase the monthly dollars provided in the CVB to better align WIC food packages with the DGA (\$24 for children, \$43 for pregnant and postpartum participants, and \$47 for breastfeeding participants).<sup>[13]</sup> They concluded that an increase in CVB value may help overcome reported barriers to CVB under-redemption, such as different fruit and vegetable preferences amongst household members, poor access to WIC-approved vendors, and vendor authorization and selection policies<sup>[14-19]</sup>. Although recommended by NASEM, an increase in the CVB was not passed into law, leaving the CVB at \$9 and \$11 per month for children and women, respectively.

## CURRENT POLICY

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Rescue Plan Act (Pub. L 117-2) was signed into law in March 2021. This Act authorized states to provide a 4-month increase to the WIC CVB, resulting in a per month CVB of \$35 for each eligible child and each eligible adult. Although initially set to expire on September 30, 2021, Congress voted to extend the increased CVB for three months (October 1 through December 31, 2021) as part of a continuing resolution (Pub. L 117-43). The resolution also adjusted per month amounts to \$24 for children, \$43 for pregnant and postpartum participants, and \$47 for breastfeeding participants. Adjustments were made to be consistent with the NASEM recommendations. In December 2021, another continuing resolution was signed into law (Pub. L. 117-70),

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allowing for an additional extension of the temporary CVB increase until March 31, 2022. Most recently on March 15, 2022, the omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022 (Pub L. 117-103) extended the increased CVB through the end of fiscal year 2022 (September 30, 2022).

It is estimated that between April 2021 and March 2022, the increased CVB provided an estimated \$1.1 billion in additional nutrition benefits to over 4.7 million WIC participants.<sup>[20]</sup> Preliminary data suggest that the increased CVB has made significant improvements in consumption of fruits and vegetables among participants.<sup>[21]</sup> Additionally, survey results overwhelmingly suggest that participants prefer a CVB amount higher than the pre-COVID monthly amount to cover costs of fruits and vegetables.<sup>[21]</sup>

Continuing the CVB increase through stopgap funding measures provides temporary relief, as seen throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but fails to promote long-term nutrition security and overall health and wellbeing among WIC participants. Without long-term assurance of funding for the increased CVB, state and local administrative agencies are challenged with ensuring WIC participants understand changing program benefits.

Without further legislative action or permanent extension, the CVB will be cut by about two-thirds or more in September 2022, reverting back to \$9/month for children and \$11/month for women. With rising retail food prices<sup>[22]</sup> and inflation, this is insufficient for a child or woman to meet fruit and vegetable needs over the course of a month.

Federal investment in the WIC program has consistently been found to be both cost-saving and cost-effective.<sup>[23]</sup> Further investment in the WIC program may confer additional nutritional, health, and economic benefits for the United States population.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation #1:** Congress should permanently authorize an increase in the monthly WIC CVB for fruit and vegetable purchases for WIC women and children participants to an amount recommended by the NASEM (currently \$24 for children, \$43 for pregnant and postpartum participants, and \$47 for breastfeeding participant) and adjust annually for inflation.

**Recommendation #2:** Federal funding agencies (e.g., USDA, NIH) should create a funding announcement dedicated to behavioral research on the barriers and facilitators to CVB redemption and the impact of the increased WIC CVB on WIC participants' dietary intake, purchasing patterns, and overall health and well-being.

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## ENDORSEMENTS

