

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 12, 2021

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We would first like to congratulate you on your new position as Secretary of Agriculture. We hope our offices can have a strong and fruitful relationship. We are grateful for your strong public commitment to making federal nutrition programs more accessible for families and are particularly impressed by your early focus on improving participation in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).¹ During this COVID-19 emergency, we have seen a greater need for flexibility to access the healthy foods and nutrition services provided by WIC.² In order to address the needs of WIC families, we urge the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to take meaningful steps to formally review and increase the value of the WIC food packages in a manner consistent with nutrition science.

WIC not only provides food, but health screenings, breastfeeding consultations and counselors, and resources for handling substance use disorder.³ WIC is also an essential referral resource for our young children and mothers to get access to programs that they may not be able to reach on their own. In Fiscal Year 2020 alone, the WIC program served 6.25 million women, infants, and children, with children being the largest benefactors from this program. We know this with certainty – healthier options in the WIC food packages have a demonstrated positive impact on health outcomes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that changes in the child food package, implemented in 2009, resulted in an overall reduction in childhood obesity prevalence among WIC-aged children. Likewise, WIC participation is associated with positive pregnancy outcomes and a 33 percent reduction in the rate of infant mortality. Enhancing the nutritional quality, variety, and value of the WIC food packages is an essential step in reaching all eligible families and continuing to leverage WIC's effective nutrition support to improve health outcomes for pregnant and postpartum mothers, infants, and young children.

In recognition of the successful implementation of food package changes in 2009, the Healthy - Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 required USDA to review the food packages and make appropriate changes every decade. In January 2017, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) issued a report with wide-ranging recommendations to improve the quality of the food packages. In compiling this report, NASEM was charged to issue

¹ https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/WIC_FY2020_Keydata_09-2020.pdf

² <https://www.fns.usda.gov/news-item/usda-038020>

³ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/wic/wic-fact-sheet.pdf>

cost-neutral recommendations, but there is no such requirement when USDA considers changes in a formal rulemaking. USDA did not enact changes recommended by NASEM, as they awaited the latest iteration of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs), the first to include specific nutrition recommendations based on the pregnancy, lactation, and early childhood life stages. The 2020-2025 DGAs are largely consistent with the scientific justifications outlined in the 2017 NASEM report.

Even though WIC is a supplemental program, the value of the benefit is not enough to assure that families have regular access to nutritious foods, which are often higher-cost and out of reach for many low-income families. For example, children certified for WIC services receive only \$2.25 per week for fruits and vegetables – hardly enough to ensure anywhere near the recommended daily nutrient intake. The average value of the food benefit per participant in Fiscal Year 2020 was only \$38 per month,⁴ with an even lower value of \$32 per month for children and \$31 per month for postpartum, non-breastfeeding women.⁵ There is a 21 percent drop in the estimated share of eligible infants who remain on the program after their first birthday, with families repeatedly citing the small value of the food package as a barrier to ongoing participation.⁶ By raising the value of food packages in a manner consistent with scientific recommendations, we can work to expand participation and assure healthier outcomes for our nation’s children.

In the short term, Congress has recognized this need by including a short-term increase in the Cash Value Benefit for fruit and vegetable purchases in the American Rescue Plan. This straightforward, common-sense proposal increases WIC families’ access to fruits and vegetables in the midst of a national hunger crisis, ensuring that USDA is addressing both food *and* nutrition insecurity. WIC’s role in connecting families with healthy foods is an equity priority, working to close racial disparities while addressing systemic barriers to access in communities of color. A full review of the food packages, increased in value yet consistent with the scientific recommendations in the 2017 NASEM report and the 2020-2025 DGAs, is an essential step in improving the variety and nutritional quality of children’s diets and improving a series of diet-related health conditions, including obesity and diabetes.

With the Biden administration committed to updating and modernizing our federal feeding programs to best reflect a modern healthy diet, now is the time to review and update the WIC food packages and invest in higher value. Thank you for your careful consideration to this request and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Kirsten Gillibrand
Senator



Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

⁴ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/wisummary-1.pdf>

⁵ <https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/resource-files/WICPC2018FoodPackage-Summary.pdf>

⁶ <https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/Making-WIC-Work-Better-Full-Report.pdf>

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