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Association

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ISSUES BRIEF

# WIC FRUIT AND VEGETABLE BENEFIT

Since 2009, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has provided a monthly vegetable and fruit benefit to approximately 6.3 million participants nationwide. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this small monthly benefit was increased to \$35 per month per participant, more than tripling access to produce for WIC participants.

**Healthy Choices for Kids:** The WIC vegetable and fruit benefit, known as the Cash Value Benefit (CVB), has a demonstrated impact on improving child health. Monthly support in purchasing vegetables and fruits has diversified the diets of WIC-enrolled children and provided vital nutrients to pregnant and postpartum women.

After the CVB was introduced in 2009 to promote alignment with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recorded a nationwide decrease in the prevalence of childhood obesity among WIC-enrolled toddlers. With childhood obesity leading to a five-times-factor risk of adulthood obesity, enhanced access to WIC benefits is a critical intervention to reduce healthcare expenditures related to chronic diet-related conditions. Enhancing WIC's CVB is especially critical with rising childhood obesity rates as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies indicate that the average 5-year-old child has a 12.5% weight gain. After nearly a decade of progress in addressing childhood obesity - including bringing obesity rates among WIC enrolled children in line with the general child population - WIC must be bolstered to address emerging child health priorities stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2017, an independent expert panel of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) formally recommended that the WIC benefit be modified to include a more generous CVB for vegetable and fruit purchases. This expert recommendation formed the basis of bipartisan proposals in Congress - the WIC Benefit Flexibility during COVID-19 Act, introduced by Rep. Kim Schrier (D-WA) and the late Rep. Ron Wright (R-TX) - that was eventually passed as a short-term increase to \$35/ month available until September 2020.

**Creating New Markets:** Increasing WIC's vegetable and fruit benefits is a win-win proposal for WIC shoppers, retailers, and producers. Especially as the food supply chain was disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, WIC's capacity to partner with industry stakeholders and create new markets was a constructive strategy to avert further economic disruption. WIC's certification of farmer and farm stand vendors and the intrinsic link to the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program created new opportunities to directly benefit the local farm economy. The strong majority of WIC transactions are at retail grocery stores, with WIC business being a substantial driver of transactions at smaller retailers, especially in rural communities. Additional benefit, especially for fresh produce, is demonstrated to have proportionately increased overall purchases and returned its investment to the local economy.

**The Problem:** 4.7 million WIC participants are going to lose enhanced benefits for vegetables and fruits by September 30<sup>th</sup>.

**Policy Priority:** Congress must extend the Cash Value Benefit increase until September 2022 to support the long-term health of children, support markets for producers, and invest in rural communities.