

California Leadership Education In Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities

Christina Armendariz, Dietetic Intern; Karnie Babikian, Dietetic Intern;
Jessica Martinez, Dietetic Intern



Bipartisan Support Needed to Fully Fund the WIC Re-Authorization of 2024

Summary

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has been instrumental in providing nutrition support to nearly 6.7 million individuals including pregnant women, mothers, infants, and young children living in low-income households nationwide. More specifically, WIC provides monthly food benefits, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and refers participants to community resources. Over the past 25 years, Congress has supported fully funding of the WIC program. However, WIC costs are higher this year than ever before- an estimated additional \$1 billion. This is partly because more women, infants, and children are qualifying and signing up, resulting in more individuals getting food supplementation, nutrition education, and counseling services. Congress is putting off full funding. With this projected shortfall of \$1 billion for fiscal year 2024 there is concern that failing to fully fund WIC could put two million individuals at risk of being unable to access the vital nutrition assistance provided by WIC. In addition, this shortfall would disproportionately impact and disadvantage the Black and Hispanic communities. Advocating for the reauthorization of WIC is crucial to ensuring the program receives adequate funding to serve 6.7 million young children and pregnant/postpartum adults living in low-income households. With the ongoing rise in food cost, this poses a significant public health threat.

The Problem

The food insecurity rate amongst Americans has risen from 10.2% in 2021 to 12.8% in 2022. This equates to 44.2 million people who were food insecure at that time; moreover, this number is predicted to be even higher with the rise in food costs. Considering that WIC serves low-income households, inadequate funding of the WIC program could lead to even higher food insecurity rates in America. Studies have shown that WIC is associated with a reduction in food insecurity amongst its participants and has also led to healthier diets among children who participate in the program. Research has also shown the extensive impact the WIC program has made on its participants including lower risk of premature infants, low birth weight infants, and infant mortality. Approximately 40% of the infants in America participate in the WIC program. Since 2020, there has been a 12% increase in overall participation in the program. These are astounding numbers that emphasize the great need for adequate funding. Although Congress expects states to fill in the funding gaps, this is not guaranteed and likely will not occur due to lack of financial resources.

The Solution

It is important that Congress provide the additional \$1 billion to fully fund WIC to reduce risk to women, infants, and children who receive nutrition support and assistance from this program. Child Nutrition Reauthorization is the process through which Congress makes changes to laws that authorize child nutrition programs like WIC (this also includes the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, Summer Food Service Program). Some of these child nutrition programs are permanently authorized, but WIC is not one of them. This means the budget for the WIC program is

subject to federal budget negotiations. WIC should have permanently authorized appropriations. The Consolidated Appropriations Act 2023, 2024 increased fruit and vegetable benefits to adjust for inflation and rising prices of produce, through January 2024. This made a big impact on participants. If fully funded again, Congress can ensure that WIC benefits such as this continue and that all women, children, and infants continue to have access to nutrition support they need.

Commented [KS1]: A lot being said here. Is there a way to streamline and focus on WIC?

Closing Thoughts

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has served as a vital lifeline to nearly 6.7 million individuals. Despite consistent congressional support over the past 25 years, projected shortfalls of \$1 billion for fiscal year 2024 raise concerns about the program's ability to meet its obligations, potentially leaving 2 million individuals without access to essential nutrition assistance. This funding deficit disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic communities and could exacerbate food insecurity, which has been on the rise, further emphasizing the critical need for adequate funding to ensure the program's effectiveness in reducing food insecurity and promoting healthier diets among participants, especially children.

Here are some statements from WIC participants about their experience utilizing their benefits, further supporting the community's need for full funding of the WIC program.

"My family has loved the increase in fruits and vegetables. I can buy more instead of stretching the \$9 I used to get for my daughter. We used to run out of fruits and vegetables a lot, and now we don't. Please don't stop this increased benefit." -Jazmin

"My daughter just turned 1. To me, having \$35 a month for fruits and vegetables means I can buy more for her while we transition to table food. Please don't stop this vital benefit increase for WIC families!" - Ferris

"The amount we receive is not enough to last for a whole month. Fruits and vegetables are very expensive. Just for 2 avocados you pay about \$5, that is almost the whole \$9 we get for breastfeeding mothers. Please increase the monthly benefits." Anonymous WIC participant

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