

# “I was grateful for what I got, but it just seemed like \$9 wasn’t enough.”

## WIC staff and families’ experiences during the WIC fruit and vegetable policy changes

### Scope of the Issue

In 2022, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) served approximately 6.2 million pregnant, postpartum, breastfeeding women, and children up to age 5 in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A key feature of WIC is the food package that provides essential foods to support a healthy, well-balanced diet.<sup>2</sup> Within the food package is the Cash-Value Benefit (CVB), which gives WIC families money to spend towards fruits and vegetables each month. Research shows that exposure to a variety of healthy foods at a young age increases the likelihood of lifelong healthy eating habits.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the CVB has the potential to reduce healthcare costs for WIC participants by encouraging a healthy and nutritious diet to combat chronic diseases.<sup>4</sup>

From fall 2018 until summer 2021, the CVB for fruits and vegetables was \$9/child/month. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) provided WIC State agencies a temporary option to increase the CVB to \$35/child/month starting in June 2021 to help those who were disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Four months later in October 2021, all WIC State agencies were required to change the CVB to \$24/child/month and a year later in October 2022 to \$25/child/month. As of October 2023, the CVB was extended to \$26/child/month, adjusting for inflation.<sup>5</sup> With the price of fruits and vegetables continuing to increase due to inflation, along with an increase in hunger among American families<sup>6</sup>, the CVB plays a critical role in helping reduce food and nutrition insecurity and improve diet quality for millions of families nationwide. However, successful implementation of the CVB by WIC agency staff

and utilization and satisfaction among WIC participants are critical factors that influence the CVB’s impact on increasing families’ access to nutritious foods. Thus, from fall 2022 to spring 2023, the Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition (GSCN) conducted interviews with 23 WIC State agency staff, 61 local agency staff, and 76 caregivers of child WIC participants located across the United States to obtain their perspectives on the CVB changes. GSCN also collected administrative datasets from 27 WIC State agencies that included the dollar amount of CVBs redeemed by WIC participants from April 2020 to September 2022.<sup>a</sup>

### WIC Agencies’ Experiences

WIC agencies were excited for the opportunity to provide WIC families with more fruit and vegetable benefits; however, the frequent and quick turnaround CVB changes strained WIC agency staff time and resources. WIC State agencies indicated the ideal lead time to change the CVB amounts is approximately 3 – 4 months, which would provide the necessary time to complete the several steps to update the CVB. To successfully implement new CVB amounts, WIC State agencies must plan and strategize, communicate with WIC local agencies, train staff, and communicate the changes to WIC participants. WIC agencies described making the necessary CVB updates as an “all hands-on deck” situation and many staff engaged in overtime to meet the implementation deadlines. WIC agencies said they were grateful for the support from the USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service and national professional organizations providing technical assistance, clarifying any questions, and sharing participant communication resources with them.

Timeline of CVB changes for Child WIC Participants



<sup>a</sup> The study was funded by Healthy Eating Research, a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation national program, as part of the 2021 Special Solicitation on COVID-19 and Socioeconomic Recovery Efforts.

**“If we haven’t started issuing [the CVB] four months out...It’s not a huge lift. When it’s within 30 days or even 60 days, it’s quite a lot. It’s a lot more on our local agencies, because a lot of the times they’re the ones who are taking the brunt of having to reissue all of these food packages.”**

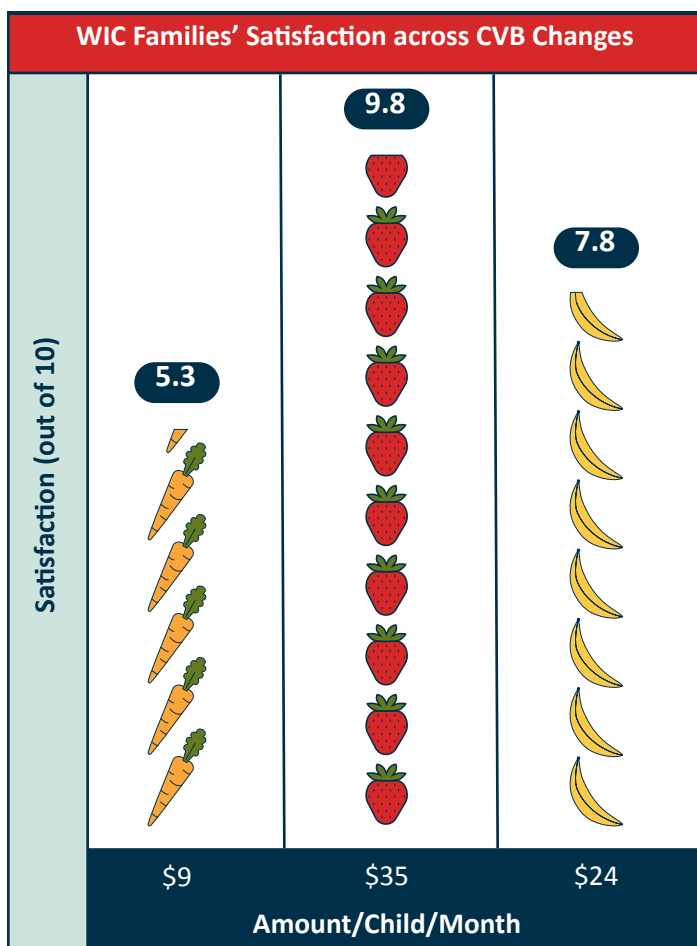
**– State agency Director**

## WIC Families’ Experiences

WIC families expressed high satisfaction with the \$35/child/month. At \$35/child/month, families shared they were able to afford a healthier diet, serve more fruits and vegetables with meals, and try new and a wider variety of fruits and vegetables. Notably, WIC families told us they were able to purchase fruits and vegetables throughout the month, compared to just a week or two when receiving the \$9/child/month CVB. WIC statewide redemption data supports families’ experiences. Monthly CVB purchases increased an average of 240% at the \$35/child/month value compared to the \$9/child/month.

**“[The increased CVB] opened the door to be able to find and afford products that normally I wouldn’t be able to add into my grocery cart to meet the needs of what she [my child] needs.”**

**– Caregiver**



## Ensuring Equity

WIC agencies with more ethnically diverse caseloads, including Indian Tribal Organizations, **experienced greater challenges with staffing capacity and constrained resources to make changes to the CVB.** Insufficient staffing and technology resources at times caused delays in implementation that prevented WIC participants from receiving the full CVB amounts.

**Redemption data found non-Hispanic Black families had lower redemption rates compared to Hispanic, non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Asian, and non-Hispanic families of other races.** WIC agencies could share resources and participate in learning networks to increase equitable access and redemption of the CVB.

## Recommendations and Next Steps

Recommendations to help ensure the WIC CVB serves its vital role in increasing access to nutritious food for millions of families nationwide include:

- **Reinstate the higher amount of \$35/child/month of the CVB and then adjust annually for inflation:** Policy makers have a unique opportunity to aid families in meeting nutritional needs. The higher CVB amounts provide WIC participants with increased variety and access to fruits and vegetables necessary for a healthy and balanced diet. Also, due to the rising cost of fruits and vegetables, adjusting for inflation annually ensures continued access when prices of fruits and vegetables increase. Annual increases also enable WIC agencies to develop standard procedures to make the CVB change an integrated or annual step, reducing burden on agencies and staff.
- **Establish minimum lead time requirements:** Minimum lead time requirements (e.g., 3 months) for the implementation of food package changes with additional time required for complex changes will help minimize errors or disruptions in the issuance of benefits.
- **Ensure equitable resource allocation:** When centering equity, consider that groups who experience food access barriers and adverse health outcomes are often served by agencies that are under-resourced and/or understaffed.<sup>7</sup> Additional financial and technical resources should be allocated to support these WIC agencies with CVB changes, including funding for staff training, system upgrades, and the creation of educational materials for participants.

- **Incorporate feedback mechanisms for quality improvement:** WIC agencies experienced several CVB implementation challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. To minimize unintended consequences, federal agencies can solicit feedback from WIC State and local agencies (e.g., holding listening sessions with WIC agencies) to identify areas for improvement and ways to resolve any challenges to ensure there are no delays in WIC participant receipt of updated benefits.

## References

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