

Hardship brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in Pennsylvania

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended all of our lives and has brought extraordinary challenges for families with children. Hundreds of thousands across PA have faced job loss or reductions to work hours. In addition, child care and school closures have made it impossible for many parents and caregivers to work. Even before the pandemic, households with children had higher rates of food insecurity, and data from the U.S. Census Household Pulse Survey has consistently shown high rates of hunger and hardship for households with children. They have been more likely to lack sufficient food, be behind on rent or mortgage, and struggle to pay basic expenses. Research shows that these material and financial hardships can have serious negative effects on children's long-term health and education. Ensuring eligible families can access WIC is an important means of providing some protection from hardship, whether pandemic-related or otherwise.

Families with children have been hit hard by the pandemic



Program adaptations helped WIC operate safely during the pandemic

The USDA made numerous waivers available to ensure WIC's essential services could be delivered safely, mitigate food package item shortages in grocery stores, and minimize travel challenges during the pandemic. PA implemented [nearly a dozen waivers](#), with the following ones being most impactful for clients:

- Physical presence:** Relaxes requirement for in-person office visits at enrollment/re-enrollment and allowed WIC staff and participants to postpone laboratory tests and body measurements that are typically done at the initial visit to determine eligibility and at recertification visits.



- Food package substitutions:** Due to supply issues, allows participants to substitute milk of any available fat content despite the designation of their food package.



- Separation of duties:** With WIC offices closed to the public and many staff teleworking, allows certifications and recertifications to be conducted over the phone by a single staff member.



- Remote benefit issuance:** Waives the requirement for in-person food instrument pick-up. In PA, this means the benefits can be loaded to the eWIC card without the client being present.



WIC client surveys & interviews during the pandemic revealed both challenges and positive changes

Challenges:

- Barriers to reloading the eWIC card
 - Transportation
 - Significant mail delays
 - Sheltering in place for those with high health risks
- Difficulty finding WIC-approved foods in retailers
 - Too few participating retailers, coupled with transportation barriers
 - Stocking issues for many participating retailers



Positives:

- Use of "Telehealth" (services via remote technology) improved program convenience and accessibility
- Online or phone application processes have streamlined the enrollment process



The pandemic exposed a serious shortcoming of Pennsylvania's eWIC card

Following both a national trend and USDA requirement, in 2018 PA began issuing WIC benefits on a "smart card" rather than paper vouchers. However, unlike states that chose an online electronic benefits transfer (EBT) system, PA opted for an offline technology system. This means:

- Cards cannot be loaded remotely. Clients must bring their card to the WIC office, or mail it and wait for it to be returned by mail.
- The cards also hold a limited amount of data (3 months of benefits), so PA was unable to use a waiver that would have allowed the issuance of 4 months of benefits.



Top Issues WIC clients noted about their experiences with WIC during the pandemic

1. Lack of remote reloading of eWIC cards is tremendously problematic

The most frequent comment from clients was about the difficulty they faced reloading their eWIC card. The need to go to the office or mail the card in to be reloaded has caused some delays in getting benefits, and often did not allow clients to fully utilize their benefits. Some clients shared they have gone without benefits due to challenges getting to the office. The vast majority reported they would prefer if the cards could be reloaded remotely. One former client who has 3 toddlers shared this reason for why she is no longer receiving WIC: *"The closest one [WIC office] is 35 minutes away driving. We don't have public transportation, so if you don't have a car, you can't get there. Then they opened [a] satellite location about 15 minutes away and my community center would provide transportation there. When COVID happened, they stopped transportation, so I wasn't able to get there."* Mailing the card was not an adequate solution. Another mom noted: *"I am not able to use all of my benefits because I have to mail it [eWIC card] in to be reloaded before the end of the month when there are still benefits on it, so I lose those benefits."*



2. Telehealth is extremely popular

Telehealth allows clients to access services (such as nutrition education) online using computers, smartphones, and/or tablets.



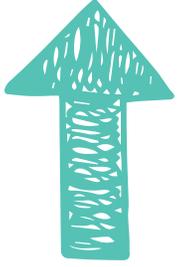
Telehealth is not only more convenient, but also avoids two of the most common barriers identified by clients: lack of reliable and affordable transportation, and WIC office hours that conflict with their work hours. A current WIC client enthusiastically shared: *"It is convenient! The WIC office isn't close to me so I would absolutely want the option for telehealth in the future as well."* And a former client explained that she dropped out of the program due to scheduling issues. She said, *"My experience when enrolled in WIC was a good and challenging time. It was very hard to get appointments with my availability. Most times I'd have to take off work or be late just to get WIC resources in a timely manner."* When asked what changes to WIC would have made her more likely to stay in the program, she responded: *"Telehealth."*

3. COVID-related demands highlighted the need for more WIC retailers and an improved shopping experience

Accessing WIC retailers was a common issue for clients in both rural and urban parts of the state. Many participants noted that they do not have access to a car and public transportation is limited, making it difficult to get to WIC retailers. In addition, a majority of clients noted that stores should be required to have more clear signage for WIC-approved foods and more adequate stocking of WIC-eligible foods so that they are able to fully use their benefits.



Future Directions for Pennsylvania WIC



The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provided a \$390 million investment in WIC so that states can modernize the program, support innovative service delivery models, and conduct robust outreach.

Pennsylvania will receive an estimated \$13.6 million. While USDA guidance for spending these dollars has not been finalized, there is no question that PA will be able to improve PA WIC and should target these investments wisely. The state has already opted to utilize a valuable ARP provision that allows states to temporarily increase the amounts of fruits and vegetables a family can purchase. From June – Sept. 2021, the value is \$35 per person, per month (up from \$11 for women and \$9 for children).

The heightened levels of hardship young children are facing due to the pandemic has consequences for their health, education, and economic success. For the future of these

children, their families, and our communities, PA must take steps now to invest in and improve WIC by:

- Transitioning to an online technology system for eWIC that allows for remote benefit issuance;
- Continuing and expanding telehealth and other remote technology services beyond the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Leveraging telephone appointments to connect with participants who do not have access to other technology, to allow for easier enrollment, attendance, and engagement of participants; and
- Increasing the number of WIC retailers and improving the shopping experience by providing grants and/or adjusting requirements for small retailers and specialty stores (such as farmers markets) so they can support the program.



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