

March 24, 2021

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
Chair
Senate Agriculture Committee
328A Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boozman
Ranking Member
Senate Agriculture Committee
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Stabenow and Ranking Member Boozman:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations dedicated to the health, nutrition, and wellbeing of pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children, we welcome the Senate Agriculture Committee's focus on child nutrition programs and write in strong support of advancing a Child Nutrition Reauthorization this year that considers meaningful reforms that enhance access to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

WIC is an effective public health nutrition program that saves taxpayer dollars on healthcare expenditures by ensuring healthier pregnancies and births, supporting breastfeeding, enhancing children's diets, and connecting families with healthcare and other social services. For every dollar invested, WIC returns \$2.48 in medical, education, and productivity costs. WIC reduces the rate of preterm birth and low birthweight, leads to a 33% reduction in the risk of infant mortality, and reduces the prevalence of childhood obesity.

Despite these proven public health successes, only 51% of eligible individuals were certified to receive WIC services before the COVID-19 pandemic. WIC's science-based supplemental foods are complemented by nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and health screenings that are typically provided in a community-based clinic setting. Through waiver authority granted by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, WIC providers innovated rapidly to scale up remote service models that sustain WIC's public health programming and ensure uninterrupted benefits for families during the pandemic. With these additional flexibilities and innovations, the majority of WIC agencies are reporting participation increases – with some states reporting increases as high as 20% since February 2020.

As the Senate Agriculture Committee begins consideration of a Child Nutrition Reauthorization, we collectively urge the Committee to take up the following reforms to enhance access to WIC services:

- **Address Nutrition Gaps:** Providing continuous access to WIC, as outlined in the bipartisan Wise Investment in our Children Act (WIC Act, S. 853), is essential for sustained nutrition support at critical periods of development – particularly for young children who haven't yet started kindergarten where they could participate in the school meals programs, as well as for postpartum women where the benefits of WIC for longer after childbirth would support healthier mothers.
- **Streamline Program Access:** The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of having flexibility to meet the restrictive physical presence requirements in order to meet WIC-eligible families. With greater flexibility to issue benefits and connect with families through more accessible technologies, WIC can support a greater proportion of the eligible population. Relaxing physical presence, removing additional procedural barriers to access, and creating flexibility to invest in technologies and program services is essential for

providing a streamlined and accessible clinic experience.

- **Collaborate with Healthcare Providers:** As a public health nutrition program, WIC plays a critical role in addressing nutrition-related deficiencies and adequate growth through pregnancy, infancy, and early childhood. WIC works best when partnering with healthcare providers who may be the first to identify families who would benefit from WIC. Additional steps to promote coordination between WIC and healthcare providers, including through colocation and facilitating information-sharing, will more efficiently leverage WIC services to support stronger health outcomes without duplicating tests or services across providers.
- **Modernize the Shopping Experience:** WIC shoppers face an inequitable and challenging shopping experience, with outdated regulations continuing to require that shoppers redeem their benefits in-person at retail grocery store locations. The WIC shopping experience should be aligned with common industry practices to promote modern and accessible options, including online ordering and online payment. These steps are even more urgent as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) continues to expand online purchasing options for SNAP households.
- **Strengthen Tribal Services:** Thirty-three Indian Tribal Organizations directly administer WIC services for Native American populations, an option that supports tribal sovereignty and addresses historic injustices against Native American pregnant women. USDA should be empowered with new options and flexibilities to support the Indian Tribal Organization structure, creating a more sustainable model that can support additional tribes, while also taking steps to partner more strategically with Indian Health Service and invest in the local tribal farm economy.

Our organizations are committed toward advancing common-sense reforms that enhance access to WIC, leading to healthier diets and outcomes for pregnant and postpartum women, infants, and young children. We stand ready to partner with you to ensure a strong Child Nutrition bill that builds the foundation for more modern WIC services.

Sincerely,

National WIC Association
1,000 Days
Alliance to End Hunger
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Academy of Pediatrics
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials
Association of State Public Health Nutritionists
First Focus Campaign for Children
Hunger Free America
MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger
MomsRising
Nurse-Family Partnership
Save the Children Action Network (SCAN)
Share Our Strength
Sustainable Food Policy Alliance
United Fresh Produce Association
ZERO TO THREE