



Larry Hogan, Governor · Boyd K. Rutherford, Lt. Governor · Dennis R. Schrader, Acting Secretary

The Maryland Department of Health's
Responses to the DLS FY 2022 Budget Analyses
February 15, 2021

Maryland Department of Health (MDH) - Prevention and Health Promotion Administration

MDH thanks the Governor, the Department of Budget and Management, and the Budget Committees for their support in 2020 and in 2021 with COVID-19 response efforts. We thank the Department of Legislative Services for its insightful budget analysis.

Issues

1. WIC Operational Changes Resulting from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Efforts to Increase Enrollment / Federal Waivers Approved During the Pandemic

MDH should explain how the COVID-19 pandemic and approved federal waivers have impacted Maryland WIC enrollment and participant retention in fiscal 2021 year to date. The department should also discuss whether it is requesting that FNS extend any of the waivers or program flexibilities after the COVID-19 pandemic ends. MDH should provide an update on how it has implemented any of the recommended policy changes included in the February 2020 report.

Federal legislation in early 2020 allowed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to waive certain program requirements defined in the Code of Federal Regulations so that state WIC programs could continue their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Maryland WIC has sought and received the following waivers from USDA:

- **Physical Presence** — Under normal circumstances, WIC participants are required to come to clinic appointments in person to be certified. This waiver allows participants to be certified without being physically present.
- **Medical Documentation** — Allows existing prescriptions for non-contract formula, exempt infant formula, and WIC nutritionals to be extended for a two-month period for participants with documented qualifying medical conditions.
- **Separation of Duties** — Under normal circumstances, federal regulations require that two separate clinic staff work on different parts of a certification appointment to deter fraud. This waiver allows a single staff person to perform the entire certification.
- **Remote Benefit Issuance** — Similar to the physical presence requirement for certifications, this waiver allows benefits to be issued to a participant without having to be physically present in clinic.

- **Food Package Substitutions** — In order to give participants more choices when stores have limited supplies, allowable foods have been temporarily expanded. Yogurt and milk with different fat contents are authorized for participant categories not allowed under federal regulation. In addition, participants are allowed to purchase eggs and juice in different sizes provided they have enough benefits to buy them. For example, whereas a family with two children might be required to buy two 16-ounce containers of juice, under this expansion the family can instead buy one 32-ounce container of juice.
- **Local Agency Monitoring** — This allows local agency reviews performed by the State to be done remotely.
- **Vendor Pre-Authorization** — This allows vendor applications to Maryland WIC to be approved without an immediate onsite inspection.

In addition to waivers from USDA, Maryland WIC implemented program changes to facilitate meeting the needs of families, authorized vendors and local agency staff during the pandemic:

- **Telehealth** — Breastfeeding Peer Counselors can now meet with participants and provide support through an online platform, Doxy.me.
- **Annual Vendor Training Online** — The annual vendor training has been converted to an online format in order to meet vendor training requirements.
- **Changes to WOW** — Clinic staff using WOW can now perform “split-day certifications” for participants that allow staff to gather required information one day and then obtain remaining information (heights/weights/bloodwork) within the next 30 days. The WOW system also allows staff to upload electronic documentation received from participants directly into the WOW system.
- **Online Nutrition Education** — Nutrition education for all categories is now available online through a web browser or through the Maryland WIC mobile app.

MDH is currently focused on COVID-19 pandemic response, including ensuring that WIC recipients receive needed benefits in this critical time. As Maryland continues its distribution of COVID-19 vaccine throughout 2021, we will evaluate both federal guidance, directives, and information about the status of waivers or program flexibilities, and submit additional requests to the federal government as appropriate.

More information will be detailed on MDH’s implementation of our policy changes from our February 2020 WIC report in the forthcoming WIC annual report. Some highlights are presented below.

Although participation numbers fluctuated in the early months of the pandemic, the current trend is holding steady. Many WIC participants also receive SNAP benefits. With the increase in household SNAP benefits, some families choose to spend the larger amount of SNAP benefits,

forgoing use of WIC benefits or even dropping WIC altogether. Throughout the pandemic, Maryland WIC has maintained a strong social media presence as a means of mass communication and outreach. One focus area of the messaging is to share awareness of the benefits of WIC beyond food, including breastfeeding support, nutrition education and counseling and linkage to community resources.

Policy recommendations referenced in the February 2020 report which have been implemented include:

- Expansion of outreach - social media presence has been expanded in frequency and additional outlets
- New media campaign, “I’m a WIC baby” was launched with a focus on sharing stories of former Maryland WIC babies as adults. The goal is to bring greater awareness to WIC stakeholders and others in the community that an investment in WIC babies results in successful adults.
- Streamlined eligibility determination - Maryland WIC partnered with Medicaid to develop an interface to provide a seamless verification system for WIC staff when determining adjunct eligibility. This same improvement also now provides WIC eligibility status of participants to all Medicaid providers.
- Maryland WIC also partnered with Maryland Health Connection to add a WIC eligibility statement to participant welcome letters to bring awareness to those not currently enrolled that they may be eligible for WIC.
- In response to a need for enhancing the WIC shopping experience, a series of “Quick Tip” modules is being developed along with enhancements to the WIC participant app. The app has also been modified throughout the pandemic to reflect expansion of WIC Authorized Foods.