Explainer: What Is the WIC Program?

Nutritious Foods Lead to Healthier Kids

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federal grant program designed to improve the health of low-income pregnant women, new parents, infants, and children. It does so by providing expert-chosen nutritious foods that are optimal during pregnancy, breastfeeding, and the development stages of the first five years of a child’s life.

Infants and children up to age five and pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women with a household income of 185% of the federal poverty level or lower are eligible.

Since it began almost 50 years ago, the WIC program has proven to have a significant positive impact in the crucial early years of children’s lives. When compared to eligible non-participants in WIC:

- Women receiving WIC have healthier babies with healthier birth rates.
- WIC families purchase and eat healthier foods.
- Children benefiting from WIC are more likely to receive preventative care.
- Babies whose families participate in WIC score higher on development assessments at age 2.

Since 2008, WIC participation has steadily declined, even during years when the number of eligible Kansans has increased.

The Kansas Department of Health and Environment and local health departments administer WIC at the state level. Participants receive benefits, which can only be used to purchase WIC-approved foods, on electronic benefit transfer cards that function like PIN-protected debit cards.

The dollar amount each family receives monthly is based on the WIC food package created for the

WIC is a cost-effective nutrition improvement and anti-poverty program. Every $1 invested in the program saves approximately $2.48 in future medical, educational, and productivity costs.

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age and number of pregnant and postpartum parents and infants and children in the household.

Families also receive vouchers that can only be used to purchase fresh produce, ranging from $8 to $11 per month. During the COVID-19 pandemic, families have been receiving an increased fresh produce voucher, ranging from $24 to $47 per month. This increase will expire December 16, 2022.

Common barriers to WIC participation for eligible families include:
• Lack of information regarding eligibility;
• Unmet language and translation needs;
• Lack of transportation; and
• Negative customer service experiences.

What’s Next?
Grant money from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that should be increasing the health and well-being of Kansas children is going unspent each year.

Fortunately, Kansas is making progress. In 2021, the Kansas Department for Children and Families and Department of Health and Environment were selected by Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry campaign to receive funding for a demonstration project designed to increase eligible families’ participation in both WIC and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

Both agencies are developing automated data matching processes to compare WIC and SNAP eligibility lists daily to ensure that eligible families enrolled in just one are informed of their eligibility for both programs. **Kansas must continue pursuing opportunities to increase outreach about eligibility for and the benefits of WIC for the state’s children and families.**

ABOUT KAC

Kansas Action for Children (KAC) is a nonprofit advocacy organization working to make Kansas a place where every child has the opportunity to grow up healthy and thrive.

Based in Topeka, KAC works across the political spectrum to improve the lives of the more than 700,000 children who call Kansas home. We engage in bipartisan advocacy, partnerships, and information-sharing on key issues, including early learning and education, health, and economic security for families.

We work with policymakers, local organizations, and fellow advocates to inform sound policy, foster collaboration, and promote an equitable tax system. For more than 40 years, KAC has been a resource to leaders and advocates who work to ensure a brighter future for every child.