

Remote WIC Services: Benefits and Challenges



The federal Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) addresses food insecurity through nutrition education, breast/chest-feeding support, and food benefits.

Background

In the spring of 2020, WA WIC received a COVID-19 waiver allowing WIC appointments to be delivered remotely. Previously, almost all appointments were conducted in-person. From 2020-2022, Public Health - Seattle & King County (PHSKC) researchers evaluated how moving WIC services remote during the COVID-19 pandemic affected **enrollment, retention, and redemption of benefits**.

They compared what happened when PHSKC WIC services were delivered remotely to when services were delivered in-person before the pandemic.

Who participated?

17

WIC Staff interviewed

50

WIC Recipients interviewed + focus groups

16,841

WIC Recipient data from before and during the pandemic

What did we find?

Enrollment

Since March 2020, there has been a small but **sustained increase in the number of recipients enrolled**. Children are staying in WIC for longer.



of WIC recipients enrolled



Length of time children stayed enrolled in WIC

Retention

Remote services made it easier to enroll and stay enrolled in WIC. It was easier for recipients to schedule and attend appointments by phone.



"It's been easy [to attend WIC appointments by phone]. It's nice because sometimes... I don't have it in my calendar, and then when they call, I don't miss the appointment."

"I'm very satisfied with getting it remotely. I don't feel like I've had a hindrance with COVID-19... I'm waiting on an Amazon package for half a week, but you guys get my benefits at midnight on the 20th."



Recipients and staff were satisfied with the convenience of remote services, though some missed aspects of in-person appointments.

Benefits redemption

Compared to before the pandemic, recipients redeemed fewer monthly food benefits. Among other reasons, this may in part be due to some challenges with remote services. However, data also show that families who required interpretation services consistently redeemed more food benefits relative to families who did not need interpretation services.



Some staff found it **harder to build relationships** with new recipients over the phone. This could reduce recipients' investment in and use of WIC.

"Clients without established relationships, they don't feel safe to share things with us over the phone."

Many staff found it **harder to orient new recipients remotely**. This may have delayed recipients' ability to redeem benefits.



"If I have a client in the office, I can just download the app for her. But over the phone I'm trying to explain it to them blindly.... [S]ometimes by the 3rd visit they still haven't used [their benefits]."

Language

Remote services uniquely affected recipients who speak languages other than English.

✘ Challenges

Remote services may add additional complications with interpretation services and remote orientation.

✔ Advantages

In-person appointments may have created greater barriers for recipients who speak languages other than English. Those recipients may especially benefit from remote services, which remove those barriers.

What's Next?

Participant suggestions for future WIC activities include:



Continued extension of remote services for at least some WIC appointments.



Continue exploring the impact of changes to the WIC program on recipients who speak languages other than English.



Examine strategies to continue improving remote WIC implementation, including by studying strategies staff have already begun implementing.



For more information, contact:
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