

January 27, 2025, Advisory Group meeting

Notes:

In attendance: Jenny Barta, Terrie Jorgenson, Kristy Rott, Marianne Nelson, Teresa Severson, Amy Wittnebel, Jill Wilson, Katie Galloway, Wendy O'Leary, Marlee Morrison, Kris Klopp, Somadee Cheam, Michelle Weberg, Maria Bernhardt, Tina Breitenbach, Kate, Franken, Tami Matti, Rebecca Gruenes, Tammie Edmundson, Jessie Zins. **Absent:** Polly Ahrens, Hannah Miller

New food product questions

With future food package changes, we are looking for input on 48 oz. frozen juice. For pregnant and postpartum women, frozen juice will not offer the maximum benefit and might not be as available in stores. It is not as popular a choice as it once was. Advisory group (AG) would like to keep frozen juice in the food package. It is easier and lighter to carry from the store if participants have transportation issues. Frozen juice is more available in smaller stores and there are more choices for orange juice. The default juice will be 64 oz. ready to use juice. We will need to educate participants that frozen juice does not provide the full benefit amount. Another question raised to AG was, is it easier to make changes to different categories all at once or just new food options per category in smaller increments. Preference is to roll out the changes at one time. The shopping guide will not be printed with updates until all changes are made. However, the updated shopping guide and other information will be posted on the website, app, and we will provide talking points for changes.

Management Information System (MIS) changes will be required for food package changes. For example, whole grains will change to 16 oz. instead of 1 whole grain option. Also, AG members were encouraged to look for wild rice in their regions so we can make local brands options available.

Medical Assistance (MA)/Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach text

Currently Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) WIC sends *quarterly text messages* promoting the program to medical assistance (MA) recipients, who qualify for WIC. Texts go out the first Monday in February, May, August, and November. Refer to the [WIC Communications and Outreach](#) webpage. In February, a pregnancy specific text within the MA group will be added. An additional text to SNAP recipients will be added this year. Currently, we're finalizing the message. **We would like input on timing of SNAP texts.** Currently, MA texts are spread over 5 weeks. If we extend that time, the data gets outdated missing some potential eligible participants. The number of texts sent to SNAP recipients will be much smaller. We will cross-reference the SNAP list with the MA list, and only reach out to those on the SNAP list but not on the MA outreach list. A test comparison between SNAP and MA enrollment found

approximately 10,000 kids that were under 5 on SNAP but not on MA. This is the estimate of additional outreach texts sent from the SNAP list that are not included in the MA outreach list.

Discussion question – would you like the SNAP texts to be pushed at the same time as the MA texts or afterwards? **Group would like all texts (MA and SNAP) sent at same time.**

National WIC Association (NWA) local agency voting members – how to handle when turnover in advisory group.

The National WIC Association (NWA) made updates to by-laws in Spring of 2022 at the annual business meeting. One of the changes made was to create parity in voting at the board level for state agency representatives and local agency representatives. With adding two more sections to the state agency level (vendor management and breastfeeding) this meant increasing the number of voting members from local agencies in each state to four. Previously there was only one voting member from local agencies in each state, so each state agency needed to identify three more voting members from local agencies.

Traditionally in Minnesota WIC, the local agency voting member had been the WIC Program advisory group chair position. Last year, the WIC advisory group discussed the need to identify three additional local agency voting members. It was decided that one representative should be from tribal nation grantees (there are seven in Minnesota), the other two should be based on caseload or region depending on where the chair is coming from to seek balance. The advisory chair will hold one of the four positions. The remaining three local agency representatives will be determined at the January advisory group meeting. Currently voting member openings are for metro region (Marianne) or group 1 caseload rep (Jill) and a tribal rep. **Action step** - Tina will send advisory group members the document National WIC Association local agency member representatives to review. Advisory group must identify new voting members to send to National WIC Association. This will be on the agenda for the April advisory group meeting. Identifying NWA's local agency voting membership is essential to ensure full participation in the 2025 NWA Annual Business Meeting, scheduled virtually for May 15 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Guidance for cutting back on other tasks or streamlining due to increased administrative tasks – request made by Jill Wilson, metro caseload rep.

As a follow up to the funding conversation at the October meeting, it was requested to discuss if MDH WIC has any guidance or recommendations for cutting back on tasks or streamlining due to the increased administrative tasks taken on by local agencies, e.g., processing on-line apps., mobile management, etc. Local agencies have a hard time keeping up at times with all the demands and need guidance on what to prioritize. Can outreach be minimized? Are there suggestions for stream-lining appointments? Other tasks? Discussion about what can be minimized to meet client, and appointment needs while meeting requirements.

There is recognition that things are changing rapidly, however, we also realize we need to keep things accessible and convenient. Federal regulations haven't gone away. At last regional meetings this similar topic was discussed so that local agencies can learn from each other and share how they are managing some tasks and perhaps learn other ways to

complete common tasks. Local agency staff are experts, and you can learn a lot from each other.

Another suggestion is to come up with a list of administrative tasks to share with consultants. They can help support agencies and provide ideas on ways to streamline tasks. Management evaluation closeout letters often have recommendations and suggestions for enhancing WIC services. A suggestion was made that “Sharing tips and tricks especially around technology” could be added to regional meetings as a standing agenda item.

Local agencies have varying approaches in how they manage online applications. This has been a previous topic at regional meetings to give agencies an opportunity to learn about different processes. Rebecca will pull comments from this meeting and regional meetings and offer some proposed changes to the online application. Consultants will bring back this topic for additional discussion at regional meetings. Note: if you have applications that are not for your county you can email rachel.freund@state.mn.us or forward them to appropriate agency if you can send it encrypted.

WIC data sharing efforts

MDH WIC has taken steps to facilitate sharing WIC applicant or participant data with the following public programs, including family home visiting (FHV), Head Start (HS), Child and Teen Check-ups (C&TC), Minnesota Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), Longitudinal Follow-up for Newborn Screening Conditions, Minnesota Immunization Information Connection (MIIC), and Minnesota Maternal Mortality Review Committee (MMRC).

Before a local WIC agency can share WIC applicant and participant data with FHV, HS or C&TC programs, they must take additional steps to ensure all outlined legal prerequisites for data sharing are met. MDH WIC state office will facilitate the data sharing with the other listed programs.

The following steps are necessary before a local agency can share confidential WIC data.

Step 1 - confirm that the non-WIC program’s intended use of the data is allowed under the WIC regulations. **Step 2** - enter into written agreement with non-WIC program. MDH WIC will provide direction and templates for local agencies through the operations manual. **Step 3** -provide notice to WIC applicants and participants via the updated “rights and responsibilities” document. **Step 4** - notify MDH WIC of your written agreement.

MDH WIC has received approval from the chief State health officer for sharing of WIC applicant/participant data with local agency programs through a written designation. A copy of this written designation will be included in the Minnesota operations manual (MOM).

Status of data sharing agreements. Templates for sharing data with FHV, HS, and C&TC programs will be included in MOM once finalized. For a local agency to implement these data sharing agreements and commence data sharing, the four steps listed above must be followed. The rights and responsibilities document is currently being updated and the new version will need to be provided to every participant, including those who are already

enrolled. To provide this rights and responsibilities document, MDH WIC will send a text message to participants through the My MN WIC app and via U.S. mail to households not registered in the app. MDH WIC anticipates rolling out all materials in MOM on April 1 with additional direction to local agencies.

A question was raised, asking that once an agreement is in place, will there be a need for a separate release of information for FHV, C&TC and HS programs? If all the steps have been completed above, there is no longer a need for a separate release and participants should be made aware of the referral. Another question raised is if this will be two-way sharing. We will look more into this question as it will depend on the language in the data sharing agreement.

Overview of WINNIE as part of the SPIRIT User Group

Background

Minnesota is part of the State agency model (SAM) SPIRIT user group (SUG). This is a consortium of WIC State Agencies that share the same source code and prioritize and make changes as a group. Minnesota joined the SPIRIT user group (SUG) when transitioned to HuBERT in 2009. SPIRITWeb (branded WINNIE in Minnesota) is the reengineered version of HuBERT and the newest version of a MIS currently in use across the country.

Not all states within the Spirit user group (SUG) have implemented SPIRITWeb, they must all be rolled out before changes can be made.

LIVE: Maine, Montana, Minnesota, Oklahoma ITOs (Chickasaw, WCD, Creek, Citizen Potawatomi, Choctaw, Osage, Otoe, ITC of OK)

Mississippi - Prepping production environment

Alaska - Starting Pilot February 2025

Pleasant Point Band (ME) - Summer 2025

Mississippi Band of Choctaw - Summer 2025

Missouri – Fall 2025

Change Prioritization

As part of the SUG, we work with the other states and prioritize changes in the following order:

1. Regulatory Changes from Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) or State regulations (risk factor changes, food package changes, etc.)
2. Technology upgrades to ensure products used for SWEB stay current
3. Bug fixes
4. Change requests

Upcoming WINNIE releases

Release 3.4 – Tentatively scheduled for release to **production** in April/May 2025

Contains bug fixes for issues found when current states rolled out.

Release 3.5 – to states for **testing** May 2025

Includes bug fixes and set up to allow starting food package regulatory changes.
Release 3.6 – to states for **testing** November 2025
Includes bug fixes and regulatory changes to report to Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

Current priority projects

SPIRIT releases

Participant portal – as part of Spirit user group (SUG) to be completed in 2027.

2022 universal interface – regulatory change for how WINNIE sends information to the eWIC processor.

Reengineering the HuBERT Vendor Module to incorporate in WINNIE which includes changes to allow for required reporting to FNS.

Bug Fixes

Change Requests

Can still submit change suggestions, but likely four-five years before will be prioritized into a release.

WIC funding update (follow-up from LPHA and quarterly vs annual funding)

Until March 14, we are still under a continuing resolution. No base grant provided until an appropriation is passed.

WIC funding basics. WIC is a discretionary program that relies on an annual appropriation for funding. This is different than other nutrition assistance programs like SNAP, school meals, child and adult care food program (CACFP), that are mandatory programs.

Appropriations process occurs in Congress and budgets should be set for federal programs by passing appropriation bills before October 1. Congress hasn't met the October 1 date for passing all appropriation bills since 1997. Continuing resolutions extend federal funding to give Congress more time to negotiate and pass appropriations bills.

USDA allocates funds to state agencies using a funding formula. [WIC Funding Basics \(https://media.nwica.org/2018-wic-what-funding-basics.pdf\)](https://media.nwica.org/2018-wic-what-funding-basics.pdf) was discussed. It shows the various steps involved in setting the budget.

Funding sources for WIC at MDH include two WIC grants from USDA: **Food Grant** – covers all food costs for program (covers approximately 75-80% of food costs) and **Nutrition Services and Administration Grant (NSA)** – covers state and local agency costs.

Infant Formula Rebates include two different contracts (milk formulas, soy formulas) and covers approximately 20-25% of food costs. MDH WIC is invoiced monthly based on the number of cans of standard formula redeemed by participants.

Other funds used for WIC.

The state of Minnesota used to provide funding for WIC Program local agency costs, but funds were lost when Governor Pawlenty unallotted funds to balance the budget.

Other grants can be used for WIC program costs, such as TANF, Title V, local public health grant. Some agencies have other funding sources to supplement MDH WIC funding (local tax dollars, other grant funds, etc.).

WIC funding is provided quarterly (1/3 first quarter) through base grants for food and Nutrition Services and Administration Grant (NSA). Ten percent of Nutrition Services and Administration Grant (NSA) are withheld at regional level for operational adjustment grants.

Reallocation requests for food funds and Nutrition Services and Administration Grant (NSA) occur in January, April, and July. States have an opportunity to voluntarily return funds or request more funding, but it is not guaranteed states will receive funds. USDA has done reallocations as late as August. MDH doesn't know our final grant amount until at the earliest in July due to reallocations. With continuing resolutions in recent years, our base grant level is not known until an appropriation is passed.

Minnesota WIC Nutrition Services and Administration Grant (NSA) in 2022 was \$32,712,335, in 2023 \$34,876,936 (6.6% increase), and in 2024 \$38,116,095 (9.3% increase).

Increase in State Administration costs. Payroll costs increased 13% from 2019 to 2024. Increased 5.5% from 2022-2024. **Language Line costs** (increased 52% from 2022 – 2023) 2022: \$687,000, 2023: \$795,000, 2024: 1,044,000

eWIC Processor Contractor costs. Monthly per household cost increased 48% starting with new contract as of 10/2024.

Increase in local agency WIC expenses. 2021-22: increase of 1.4% in reported WIC program costs. 2022-2023: increase of 6% in reported WIC program costs, 2023-2024 – increase of 10% in reported WIC program costs.

How much of WIC local agency expenses covered by WIC grant? In 2024: MDH WIC base grant covered 83% of reported WIC local agency expenses. After final payments, WIC grant covered 87% of reported WIC local agency expenses. Lowest level covered was 39%/42% of WIC local agency expenses, 10 local agencies didn't use all of WIC grant.

Other WIC funding sources for WIC. LPHA members suggested that MDH WIC collect data on other sources of funding used by WIC local agencies for covering WIC Program costs. We are exploring how to request this information on the monthly WIC claim. Occasionally WIC LAs report this type of information on the monthly claim. Discussion on where/how to gather this data? Some members said they would like to ask their accountants, some said perhaps we could capture data on the nutrition education plan, another mentioned looking at their daily's. All comments were a bit different as it depends on the agency.

Action/follow-up: State can investigate this more and share back as plans are formulated for gathering this data.

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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