

PLANNING FOR FUTURE DATA COLLECTION NEEDS WITHIN THE USDA SPECIAL SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION PROGRAM FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC) (SUMMARY)

Overview

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), administered at the Federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), provides grants to WIC State agencies to deliver program services to eligible participants. WIC services include supplemental foods, health care referrals, nutrition education, and breastfeeding support for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children up to age 5 who are found to be at nutritional risk. State agencies administer WIC according to Federal requirements and report program and participant data to FNS.

This study explores the State agencies' abilities to collect, store, retrieve, and report data to meet policy and program management needs now and in the future. This effort:

- Examines the current status of WIC Management Information Systems (MIS) and reviewing the data collected by State agencies;
- Identifies challenges associated with modifying the State agencies' MIS to accommodate new data elements or changes to the frequency of data reporting to support FNS data needs; and
- Recommends additional data elements to support ongoing programmatic and research-related activities within WIC and changes to how FNS requests and collects WIC data from State agencies.

This study also examines the Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) data that are becoming available as statewide WIC EBT implementation expands.

Methodology

Data collection methods:

1. Reviewed existing MIS documentation (e.g., WIC State Plans);
2. Reviewed WIC-related literature completed from 2010 through 2014 to identify data items frequently used in WIC research;
3. Interviewed FNS regional offices to obtain an overview of each WIC State agencies' MIS and upcoming system enhancement plans;
4. Interviewed eight WIC State agency directors and one local agency executive director to provide an in-depth look at the MIS capabilities and the types of data collected and stored within these systems;
5. Completed a workshop with WIC stakeholders to examine how stakeholders use WIC data, how data are reported to FNS, and what new and future opportunities exist for WIC data collection; and
6. Conducted task force meetings with FNS staff to determine the data needs at the national level for program management, monitoring, integrity, and evaluation.

Summary

- **Stakeholders want data faster.** Currently, FNS collects data for the WIC Participant and Program Characteristics (WIC PC) series biennially, and reporting has a 2 -year lag between data collection and final reporting. An improved system would reduce this timeline and allow for more timely and useful data.
- **Stakeholders want consistent data across MIS.** Different MIS currently do not produce consistent, comparable information across the State agencies. Stakeholders recommended implementing more consistent data variable names and definitions in MIS as well as adding new variables.
- **Stakeholders want more MIS flexibility to add new data elements.** State agencies that

migrated to modern MIS have more flexibility to add new data elements, yet continue to face difficulties accessing ad hoc data from their MIS to perform data analytics or build new reports. WIC program managers cite a lack of technology resources, staff, and tools to perform this function without support from their agency's technology department or technology vendor.

- **Over half of WIC State agencies operate a modern MIS and another 41 percent are planning to replace their legacy MIS in the next 2 to 3 years.** In 2002, FNS initiated the State Agency Model (SAM) at the request of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as a strategy to reduce costs through shared approaches. Based on the regional office survey conducted in February 2015, 56 percent of the State agencies (49) operate a modern WIC MIS based on a SAM or a non-SAM system. There are three SAM consortia. These consortia range from 3 to 24 State agency members that are collectively responsible for system changes and the overall integrity of the system.
- **More than one-quarter (27 percent) of State agencies completed the statewide rollout of EBT by December 2016.** EBT is an electronic delivery method that will replace paper food instruments with an electronic payment card for food benefit issuance and redemption at authorized WIC retailers. Statute requires that all 90 WIC agencies move to an EBT system statewide by October 1, 2020.
- **Stakeholders suggested a number of potential data elements to consider for future FNS data collection efforts.** The recommended elements fall into six topic areas: demographics (e.g., marital status and household language spoken); health behaviors (e.g., smoking and alcohol consumption); breastfeeding; nutrition education (e.g., topic and mode); food redemption (EBT); and vendor management (e.g., prices paid, discounts, adjustments to payments).

• **Other stakeholder recommendations for future FNS data collections include:**

- Collecting additional data related to financial management, program integrity, cost-containment management, food package costs, administrative costs, caseload management, health outcomes, and nutrition services; and
- Improving data frequency, consistency, and usefulness; using representative sampling; developing EBT analytics; and, creating a central WIC data repository.
- WIC data will change significantly in the next 4 years as State agencies update their MIS and convert from paper food instrument delivery to EBT delivery. The potential uses for new data could help improve program management and research; however, the ability to use this data will be a significant effort that requires a multi-year initiative to optimize. Such efforts require resources to define the data needed and enhance current systems to gather it and provide it. This study provides FNS with insights from stakeholders gathered during stakeholder interviews and meetings.

For More Information

Geller et al. (2016). *Planning Future Data Collection Needs within the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)*. Prepared by Manhattan Strategy Group. Alexandria, VA: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. Project Officer: Jinee Burdug. This report is available online at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/research-and-analysis>.