Food and Nutrition Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program
for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

Certification and Eligibility Resource and Best Practices Guide

WIC Mission

To safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutrition risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care.

Food, nutrition counseling, and access to health services are provided to low-income women, infants, and children under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, popularly known as WIC.

WIC provides federal grants to State agencies for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and to infants and children who are found to be at nutritional risk.

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The "Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Certification and Eligibility Resource and Best Practices Guide" was developed by United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to serve as a resource for WIC local agency and clinic staff in providing the best customer service to applicants, including participants applying for a new certification period, when determining eligibility for the program.

FNS is not establishing new policy or requirements with this guide. The guide solely represents existing best practices and examples that WIC State and local agencies may choose to use.

FNS recognizes that there may be unique circumstances that a WIC Competent Professional Authority (CPA) might encounter in a certification appointment, such as determining eligibility for migrant workers and those who have recently experienced a disaster or homelessness. This guide is not intended to address every applicant scenario, and FNS encourages WIC State agencies to develop tools and trainings to ensure CPAs are prepared to serve varying populations.

Overview of WIC Eligibility

To participate in WIC, an applicant must meet the following eligibility requirements:

- Category
- Residency
- Income
- Nutrition Risk

CATEGORY

WIC is designed to serve certain categories of women, infants, and children. Therefore, the following individuals are considered categorically eligible for WIC:

- **Women**
    - **Pregnant** (during pregnancy and up to 6 weeks after the birth of an infant or the end of the pregnancy)
    - **Postpartum** (up to 6 months after the birth of the infant or the end of the pregnancy)
    - **Breastfeeding** (up to the infant's first birthday)
- **Infants** (up to the infant's first birthday)
- **Children** (up to the child's fifth birthday)

RESIDENCY

WIC applicants must present proof of residency, as well as identity, to be certified. Proof of residency is the location or address where the applicant routinely lives or spends the night. For an infant or child applicant, documentation of residency must be provided for the person with whom the infant or child resides.

Applicants must live in the state in which they apply, though they are not required to live in the State or local service area for a certain amount of time to meet the WIC residency requirement. Applicants served in areas where WIC is administered by an Indian Tribal Organization (ITO) must meet residency requirements established by the ITO.

INCOME

To be eligible for WIC, applicants must have income at or below an income level or standard set by the State agency or be determined adjunctively or automatically income eligible based on participation in certain programs. Generally, applicants must provide documentation of income to be certified. Additional information on calculating income for the purpose of determining an applicant's eligibility can be found later in the guide.

NUTRITION RISK

This guide is designed to aid WIC staff in determining eligibility but does not address the nutritional risk component. Requirements for meeting the nutritional risk component for eligibility may be found at 7 CFR (Code of Federal Regulation) 246.7(e).

Documentation

Any document that is acceptable on paper may also be accepted as proof when viewed on electronic media such as a cell phone or tablet.

APPLICANTS LACKING DOCUMENTATION AT CERTIFICATION APPOINTMENT

WIC agencies have options available to best assist an applicant when they arrive to their certification appointment without paper documentation of identity, residency, and/or income:

- Allow for electronic documentation via phone, tablet, email, or other source.
- Allow for one type of documentation that could serve as proof for two required certification documents. Examples may include a driver's license documenting identity and residency or a pay stub with an applicant's address documenting income and residency.
- Allow for a shortened 30-day certification period, also referred to as temporary certification, where an applicant is lacking one of the three required components of determining eligibility (e.g., identity, residency, and income).
  - In this case, the applicant would then return to the WIC clinic within the 30-day timeframe with their missing documentation to receive their full certification period. When possible, clinics may allow for electronic submission of missing documentation to reduce the need for the applicant to make an additional trip to the clinic.
  - Local agencies must follow State agency guidance on temporary certifications.

APPLICANTS WITH NO DOCUMENTATION

In situations where an applicant is not able to provide proof of identity, residency, and/or income, the applicant must sign a statement attesting to his/her identity and residency. This statement must be placed in the applicant's case file, and if not included, a statement and a brief notation explaining why the applicant could not produce

proof of identity and/or residency must also be included. Please note, even when an applicant has a Verification of Certification (VOC), the applicant must provide proof of identity and/or residency or sign a statement attesting to his/her identity and residency as part of the eligibility determination process.

Income

To be eligible for WIC, applicants must have income at or below an income level or standard set by the State agency or be determined adjunctively or automatically income eligible based on participation in certain programs. The State agency will provide approved Income Eligibility Guidelines (IEGs) to the local agency.

DETERMINING INCOME ELIGIBILITY

An income eligibility determination can be conducted in three ways:

1. Confirmation of adjunct eligibility
2. Confirmation of automatic eligibility
3. Traditional income assessment

Confirmation of adjunct and/or automatic eligibility:

It is considered a best practice to first determine if the applicant is either adjunctively or automatically income eligible for WIC. If an applicant is a participant of an automatic eligibility program (as determined by the State agency) or an adjunctive eligibility program (which is federally defined as participating in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP] or participating in or being a member of a family participating in Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]), then they are income eligible for the program. State-administered programs that routinely require documentation of income, provided that those programs have income eligibility guidelines at or below the State agency's program income guidelines, may provide automatic eligibility. Local agencies should confirm with their State agency about which State-administered programs confer automatic eligibility for WIC. It is recommended that acceptable documentation of participation in these programs includes the participant's name and eligibility dates.

If an applicant is not participating in a program that confers adjunctive or automatic income eligibility, then the CPA would need to conduct an income assessment.

Assessment of current income:

When calculating a participant's current income, the CPA is responsible for documenting income that most accurately reflects the family status. This may be done by determining the current rate of income or assessing annual income. Examples of how a CPA may perform each type of calculation are shown below.

Determining current rate of income:

- Collect documentation of all income received within the 30 days prior to the certification date.
  - In this scenario, income documentation should represent 30 days' worth of pay. For example: Four pay stubs if a person is paid weekly, two if paid bi-weekly, one if paid monthly.
  - The date to start the 30 days prior to the certification appointment can be set at a date when the most recent documentation is available to the participant.
    - For example, if a participant who is paid bi-weekly received their last paycheck on March 1, but their certification appointment is on March 10, then it would be acceptable to determine their current income as of 30 days prior to March 1.
- Perform an income eligibility determination based on future income. The CPA may decide this is a more appropriate approach if a member of the household has had a recent change in employment, and income received in the prior 30 days does not accurately reflect income expected in the immediate future.
  - For example, an applicant was recently laid off but has been authorized to receive unemployment benefits for the next six months.
    - In this instance, "current" income refers to income that will be available to the family in the next 30 days (i.e., their unemployment benefits).
    - A shortened certification period may also be appropriate in this instance, because the applicant might have a change in income upon receiving new employment.

Assessing annual income:

There are situations when the use of annual income may be more appropriate than calculating current income.

It is recommended to use annual income in situations that involve the following:

- Household members who have income from different sources and are paid on different schedules (e.g., one adult is paid weekly and another adult is paid bi-weekly) or different amounts with the same frequency;
- A family member who is on a temporary leave of absence from employment, such as maternity leave;
- Teachers who are paid on a 10-month basis and are temporarily on leave during the summer months;
- College students who work only during the summer months and/or school breaks; and
- Seasonal workers.

For consistency, the recommended method for annualizing income is as follows:

1. Multiply…

- Weekly income by 52.
- Bi-weekly income (received every two weeks) by 26.
- Semi-monthly income (received twice a month) by 24.
- Monthly income by 12.

2. Do not round the values resulting from each conversion. Add all the unrounded, converted values.

3. Compare the unrounded total to the current annual Income Eligibility Guidelines (IEGs) for the household size to make the income eligibility determination. The State agency must provide approved IEGs to the local agency.

Income is all cash that a household receives. Non-cash benefits (or in-kind benefits) must be excluded when calculating gross income. While conducting an income determination, it may be necessary to ask the applicant clarifying questions about what is listed on their pay stub under "gross income" to determine if the listed amount was cash received by the applicant.

Please consult your State agency's policies and procedures for guidance on calculating income if non-cash benefits are listed under "gross income" on a pay stub.

Examples of documentation of income:

- Most recent pay stubs
- W-2 forms or income tax return for the most recent calendar year (For self-employed individuals, collecting the most recent tax return is recommended.)
- Unemployment letter
- Check stub from Social Security with current earnings
- Recent leave and earnings statement for military personnel
- Letter of employment stating annual or monthly salary of an individual

APPLICANTS WITH ZERO INCOME

It is recommended that applicants declaring zero income be prompted to describe their living circumstances and how they obtain basic living necessities such as food and shelter. These prompts help confirm that the applicant does not receive income or financial assistance.

DETERMINING HOUSEHOLD SIZE

The household size of each applicant must be determined when conducting an income determination.

For WIC purposes, the words "household," "family," and "economic unit" may be used interchangeably to refer to people who live together and/or share economic resources. An individual does not have to receive cash to be part of an economic unit. Additionally, it is possible for more than one economic unit to reside under the same roof.

- **A child** is counted in the household where he/she most routinely lives.
- If a **child resides in a school or institution**, and the child's support is being paid for by the parent or a guardian, the child is counted in the household of that parent or guardian, since the family continues to provide the economic support for the child.
- **Children of a military family who are in temporary care** can be certified in the following ways:
  - The local agency may count the absent parents and their children as the economic unit, as would have been the case prior to the parents' deployment.
  - The local agency may count the children as a separate economic unit from their parents and caretakers.
    - To be considered a separate economic unit, the unit must have its own source of income. The CPA must decide whether the income is adequate to sustain the economic unit, per State agency guidance. If the child allotments are not considered adequate, then another certification option can be used.

- The local agency may also consider the children to be part of the economic unit of the person(s) with whom they are residing.

- **In joint custody** cases, the family has several options to enroll their child in WIC:
  - One parent may apply on behalf of the child and arrange to send the WIC foods along with the child when the child stays with the other parent.
  - Both parents may apply separately for WIC benefits. In this scenario, each parent may count the child in the family size. Each household must be fully eligible (income, etc.) to proceed.
    - Option 1: both parents would receive WIC benefits each month on behalf of the child. Each parent would receive only a partial food package to ensure the child receives the correct amount of food.
    - Option 2: benefits could be distributed between the two families on an alternate-month basis.
- **A foster child** is considered an economic unit of one, as long as that child remains the legal responsibility of the child welfare agency. The payments made by the child's welfare agency—or by any other source—for the care of that child are considered the income of that foster child.
- Persons residing in a **homeless facility or an institution** are not automatically considered as members of the same economic unit for the purposes of income eligibility. If a family lives together in an institution, they would be considered a separate economic unit from other residents.
- **Pregnant women** who do not initially meet the WIC income guidelines without counting the unborn fetus *may then* be allowed to add one or more individuals (according to the number of fetuses in utero) when household size is determined.
  - To ensure WIC honors an applicant's preference and culture, we suggest that pregnant women be given the option to add the unborn baby to their household size. If the woman declines the addition, she must be informed she will not be eligible for the Program at that time. In instances when a woman declines the option to add the unborn baby to the household size, FNS encourages CPAs to schedule a certification appointment for after the baby's due date.

OPTIONAL EXTENDED CERTIFICATION PERIODS

State agencies have the option to permit their local agencies to extend certification periods for the following categories of WIC participants:

- **Infants less than six months** of age may be certified through the month the infant turns one year old, provided the quality and accessibility of health care services are not diminished;

- **A breastfeeding woman** may be certified through the month the infant turns one year old or until the woman ceases breastfeeding, whichever occurs first; and,
- **A child** may be certified for a period up to one year, as long as the child receives the required health and nutrition assessments.

Local agency and clinic staff should refer to their respective State agency policies to determine if these options are available in their State agency.

OPTIONAL SHORTENED CERTIFICATION PERIODS

WIC regulations permit the use of a shortened certification period on a case-by-case basis. Local agencies should refer to State agency guidance on when to offer a shortened certification period. Please also refer to the section on "Applicants Lacking Documentation at Certification Appointment."

Examples of applicants who may be considered for shortened certifications:

- Applicants experiencing a temporary loss of income or unemployment
- Applicants who expect an increase in their household income
- Applicants on temporary family or medical leave

SYNCHRONIZING HOUSEHOLD CERTIFICATIONS

CPAs may work with participants to align benefit dates within a household to reduce the number of visits to the WIC clinic. This provides enhanced customer service for busy families and reduces the burden of frequent clinic visits.

For WIC State agencies that use rolling-month cycles rather than calendar-month cycles, there are several options for synchronizing certification periods when certifying new participants who have a family member who is already enrolled. Depending on when the new participant is certified, State agencies have the option to prorate benefits to synchronize certification cycles.

For example, if an infant is certified on April 5, and the mother is on a monthly certification cycle that ends on April 14, the local agency can issue the infant a prorated initial month's food benefit for April 5–14. That would enable the mother to synchronize certification periods with the infant for the following month's benefits.

PROVIDING A VERIFICATION OF CERTIFICATION (VOC)

To provide continued care to WIC participants who might need to relocate during their certification period, a Verification of Certification (VOC) must be issued to ensure that the participant remains on the Program at their new location.

It is recommended that local agencies provide a VOC to every participant, especially those who are in an emergency or a situation affecting continuity of service. Local agencies must provide a VOC to an applicant who is:

- a member of a migrant family.
- likely to relocate during a certification period, including during a disaster.

The VOC must include the following key information for the seamless continuation of WIC services:

- Name of participant
- Date the certification was performed
- Date income eligibility was determined
- Nutritional risk of the participant
- Date the certification expires
- Signature and printed name of the certifying local agency official
- Name, address, and phone number of the certifying local agency
- Identification number (which may be the WIC participant ID number) or other form of VOC accountability

ACCEPTING A VOC

A VOC must be accepted if it has the required information. If it is missing information, the new (receiving) agency may contact the former (sending)

agency to confirm certification details. The transferring participant should not be denied services or have his/her benefits delayed if their VOC does not have all the required information.

A VOC must be considered valid if it contains the following three items:

1. Name of participant
2. Date the certification was performed
3. Date the certification expires

If a nutritional risk is not recorded on the VOC, or if the participant was certified based on a nutrition risk condition not in use by the receiving agency, the receiving agency must use risk code 502 (or the State agency equivalent code) “Transfer of Certification” to establish nutritional risk for that participant.

VOC points of contact for each WIC State agency can be found at fns.usda.gov/wic/wic-contacts.

In conclusion, FNS values the work that you do to provide WIC benefits and services to women, infants, and children. For more information, please visit fns.usda.gov/wic/state-agency.

Guidance documents lack the force and effect of law, unless expressly authorized by statute or incorporated into a contract. USDA may not cite, use, or rely on any guidance that is not available through their guidance portal, except to establish historical facts.

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