

WIC participants support the extension and permanency of the Cash Value Benefit (CVB) for fruits and vegetables

Background

In 2021, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) approved changes to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to increase the value of the WIC benefits used for fruit and vegetable (FV) purchases, referred to as the cash value benefit (CVB). The CVB was increased for 4 months starting in June 2021 from \$9/month to \$35/month per child and later revised to \$24/month per child in October 2021 (Figure 1). Congressional action is needed to extend these benefits. With the opportunity to collect more information from WIC families to inform policy decisions about the impact that the WIC CVB has had on low income families, two Community Advisory Board (CAB) meetings were conducted in July 2022 with WIC participants in California who were part of a larger CVB study. WIC participants reflected upon the evaluation data collected and provided participant-based recommendations on how to improve WIC's Cash Value Benefit (CVB). The purpose of this brief is to share WIC participant perspectives about the study results, changes to the CVB, changes in fruit and vegetable intake and purchasing, and economic impacts on their household as a result of the increase in CVB.

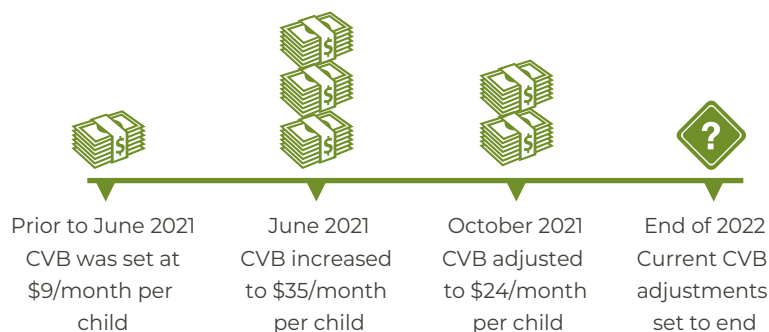
Methods

Each of the CAB participants were part of a longitudinal study conducted in Los Angeles County of 2,784 families who completed 3 surveys focused on the impact of the CVB on satisfaction with WIC, child food intake and household food security. A group of 30 English and 30 Spanish speakers was randomly selected from the survey participants and invited to attend the CAB meeting via text.

The groups were conducted by language preference (English or Spanish) as Los Angeles County has an 80% Hispanic WIC population and differences in WIC participation have been observed by language preferences in prior studies¹⁻³. The final cohort consisted of eight English speaking and seven Spanish speaking participants. Each of the CAB meetings had structured interview questions accompanied by a few figures and charts with survey results and each meeting lasted for 60 minutes. The CAB meetings were held on two separate days and were conducted by WIC employees, each a native speaker of the CAB participants' chosen language preference.

Findings from the surveys were shared with participants in order to gather more insight about how the CVB increase impacted satisfaction, spending patterns and FV intake for children. Results shown to the participants included: the changes in satisfaction (not enough, just right, too much) with each of the CVB amounts (\$9, \$35, \$24) from all of the survey time points, the increase from \$1M to \$3M spent monthly in California on FV purchases attributed to the CVB increase, and results from the first two surveys showing that child FV intake had not increased with the increase in CVB for all children. CAB participants were asked to comment on the results after they were presented.

Figure 1: Timeline of CVB changes



1. Ritchie, L. D., Whaley, S. E., Spector, P., Gomez, J., & Crawford, P. B. (2010). Favorable impact of nutrition education on California WIC families. *Journal of nutrition education and behavior*, 42(3), S2-S10.

2. Whaley, S. E., Ritchie, L. D., Spector, P., & Gomez, J. (2012). Revised WIC food package improves diets of WIC families. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 44(3), 204-209.

3. Ritchie, L. D., Whaley, S. E., & Crocker, N. J. (2014). Satisfaction of California WIC participants with food package changes. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 46(3), S71-S78.

Methods, cont.

The CAB meetings were recorded and transcribed to allow for thematic qualitative analysis of participant perceptions. The quotes were thematically coded for each interview question. Participants were coded by their language preference (EN or SP) and assigned an ID number based on the order of when they first spoke during the CAB meeting.

Participants were each mailed a \$50 gift card after completing the interview. This study was reviewed and approved by the California Department of Health and Human Services Institutional Review Board.

Results

The following sections contain the main themes that resulted from the CAB meetings. There were a total of five main themes identified from the participant responses: CVB increases are well received, CVB increases introduced more FV variety and better quality, CVB increases have been especially helpful because prices for all goods have increased, CVB increases have helped offset other household expenses, and dissemination of information and study results to WIC participants is encouraged and would be best through text links.



Changes to CVB amounts are well received



Increased CVB amounts introduced more FV variety and better quality



Increased CVB amounts have helped but prices have increased



Increased CVB amounts have helped offset other household expenses



Text links are best way to share information



Changes to CVB amounts are well received and requested to continue

Participants were presented a chart showing that the \$35/month was perceived as a better amount for WIC families than lower amounts, and that satisfaction dropped a little when the monthly CVB amount changed from \$35/month to \$24/month. One common theme among WIC participants after seeing the chart was the gratitude for any amount they receive for CVB but that the changes were a notable improvement to the \$9/month received before the changes. Participants would like to see the increased benefit continue as many mentioned that the prices of FV have increased in recent months.

Spanish speaking participants more often than English speaking participants mentioned how grateful they are for any amount, not wanting to seem like they were asking for specific amounts and seeming ungrateful.

“Even though \$9 isn't a lot, \$9 is still ... more than zero. And then, as you go and get \$35 that's a [big] increase, and then to drop down to \$24, I mean that's not too far off of \$35... but \$24 is a lot better than \$9.” –EN1

“I think to either keep it at \$24 or \$35....that seems good to me. I don't think it should be lowered because it has helped us immensely because ...everything has gone up in price. Imagine like \$35 or \$24, it's not a lot, but \$9 is almost nothing, just one container of grapes or strawberries or watermelon. So I feel like it would help us more if they put us at \$35 or leave it at \$24. If they could increase it more, it would be terrific.” –SP2

“With what they give me, either more or less, I am thankful for it. It's a free program so we can't ask.” – SP3



Changes to CVB amounts are well received and requested to continue

The second chart shown to CAB participants included data on how revenue from FV purchases throughout the state of California increased substantially since the inception of the CVB increases in June 2021. The CAB participants were asked what they thought about how this reflected their own spending patterns on FV. One participant mentioned how they were able to shop at different stores to buy better quality FV. When asked about the variety of FV that could be purchased with the increased CVB amount, participants shared that they had learned from WIC nutrition education about the importance of introducing a variety of different FV to their child's diet. Because of the CVB increase, they were better able to purchase and introduce more varieties of FV to their child on WIC, helping to make children less picky about what they ate. One participant stated that they continue to attend WIC because of how much it helps and because they learned the importance of having FV in her child's diet even though they had experienced some stigma about participating in WIC.



"I felt personally that the increase in benefits really helped. It allowed me to shop at other markets or grocery chains and get better quality of fruits and vegetables." – EN8

"I also found myself buying different kinds of fruits that I normally didn't buy ... [We] have some money on the WIC card so we don't feel so hesitant to try it." –EN2

"Through the WIC program we learned about that importance of eating a variety of fruits and vegetables ... to help alleviate any kind of pickiness... And so we definitely see where our son was getting bored with the same vegetables or fruits ... But when we saw that [CVB amount] increased, and we were able to introduce a variety, I saw that correlation of him eating more." –EN3

"I was not a big veggie eater, but with WIC I started looking at more veggies and adding more veggies to my plate... Sometimes [my daughter] doesn't pick on her plate but she picks on mine... Now, little by little, I start doing more veggies for myself and my daughter". –EN4

"Having that extra \$35 really helped. It made me want to go to other stores that are further out to get more fresh fruits, because the fruits that are in the stores that are right around us here are not so fresh" –EN2

"Truthfully, it helps a lot; sometimes I have gotten comments from others kind of making fun of me for receiving WIC, but it really is a big help with the kids and... all the doctors recommend to eat a lot of fruit and vegetables. So with that the increase from WIC it has really, really helped us, so I say for [the CVB increase] to continue" –SP2



Increased CVB amounts have helped but prices have increased

The final chart presented to participants showed that child FV intake had not increased when the CVB was increased. This was a surprise to the research team so CAB participants were asked why the increased CVB did not seem to lead to increased FV intake. Participants shared that whether they receive an increased amount or not, they would still prioritize spending their own money on FV because it's necessary for health. Inflation was cited as a likely reason for not seeing increases in child FV intake in response to the CVB increases. Participants mentioned that the increase has helped, but it doesn't feel like enough due to the costs of so many goods increasing, not only food. It was also mentioned that FV variety and quantity have to be taken into account in order to avoid wasting food and still enjoying the FV the families are eating.

"In my case I spend the same amount of money. I eat the same vegetables the only thing is that I'm saving my money when it's [\$24] than when it's \$9. It (the increase) just doesn't save me that much but I'll try and make sure [my child] eats the same amount of vegetables." –EN5

"If they give me \$9 ... but if my girl wants to eat more, I have to buy it (FV) out of pocket... you know we will always give them food but not only from what [WIC] give us, but we also have to spend from our pocket to feed ourselves." –SP4

"Everything is so expensive. You can still buy fruit but not as much." –EN4

"I want to have quality, but with this price increase you're finding this balance of trying to get that (food quality) without having food waste and I think sometimes that's where that \$35 it also helped to where you could buy throughout the month based on what you're using." –EN3

Consumer Price Index, inflation changes in Los Angeles County in last year⁴

12.1%



"Prices for food at home rose 12.1% since a year ago. Price increases across food at home expenditure categories ranged from 7.6% for meats, poultry, fish, and eggs to 17.7% for other food at home."

13.4%



In the last 12 months, the index for all items, not including food and energy, rose 6.2%. This group includes motor vehicles (13.4%), medical care (6.9%), and shelter (5.2%) related expenses.

6.9%



5.2%



The CVB increase helps offset costs for other household expenses

Participants shared while the price increases for produce has limited the FV that they could purchase, some were able to offset other household costs with the increase to the CVB.



"Yes, well, right now I drive, and I can save some cents to put gas to drive the car. As well with bills, the gas bill, the electricity bill, [everything] is really expensive. So, it (the CVB increase) helps us a lot." –SP7

"[It has helped] for other foods, gas, more things, other expenses to help me. I am able to put gas in my car. I'm able to do other things. She still will eat the same amount of vegetables if you guys only gave me \$9. So I'm still going to put my money in... if I have to spend more money on fruits and vegetables, it doesn't leave enough money to buy the rest of the food. So I have to downgrade whatever other food I have to buy." –EN5

"I feel like the increase for FV does help me with other purchases because sometimes I avoid spending my own money to buy more FV so I can use it to buy a bus pass and other things I have to get done. I can now save that money or buy other things that they (children) need." –SP2

"Yes, it helps a lot. It gives us enough to buy other things we need to. For example, chicken, if we don't have money for fruit, we don't have enough to get chicken, or meat, or ham that they (children) want or bread and other things you need at home." –SP1



Sharing information with WIC participants is best through text and links for those interested

Participants noted that text links to the information and study results would be the most recommended mode for sharing with the WIC community. CAB participants were generally interested in the results and noted that the more they learned about WIC, the more it helped with their WIC purchases and with helping others learn about WIC.

"You could send out just a little bit of information, saying we recently had the study here are the results, here's the link if you're interested in more information. I would imagine you're going to have that spectrum of people who really care, and people who don't." –EN7

"I normally ask when I have a lot of questions. To me, WIC is new, I'm a first time mom. I can give information to other people that I know that they're in need. It's always good to know those little things, I'm always asking, I'm always learning from the classes that you give or from the little links." –EN4

"[WIC] usually sends us a link to check anything new. I imagine you can do the same with this information. To me, it's important to see every change in WIC to be well informed before going to the store. That is why it is important to check every link they send us. It's good to know that people who aren't here on Zoom know what we talked about and what is happening." –SP2

Conclusion

The CAB participants' personal experiences with the CVB increase and the results from the larger CVB study suggest that a continuation of the CVB increases would be a welcome benefit for WIC families. The information shared from the CAB meetings resulted in similar themes and information shared by WIC participants about the CVB increase in more detailed interviews conducted with 30 WIC families⁵. CAB participants reported the adjusted CVB amounts are valued and much needed as inflation continues while allowing for more access to better quality and variety of the FVs purchased. Since the CVB increase is temporary, with extensions dependent on congressional action, it is imperative to share the personal impact the CVB increase have for low income families to continue advocating for WIC families.

Suggested Citation: Yezpe CE, Ritchie LD, Anderson CE, Tsai MM, Au LE, Meza M, Whaley SE (2022). WIC participants support the extension and permanency of the Cash Value Benefit (CVB) for fruits and vegetables. (Data Brief). Los Angeles, CA. Public Health Foundation Enterprises (PHFE) WIC program, a Program of Heluna Health and Nutrition Policy Institute (NPI). <https://lawicdata.org/publication/briefs/>

4. Consumer Price Index, Los Angeles Area—April 2022. Western Information Office: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. https://www.bls.gov/regions/west/news-release/consumerpriceindex_losanjeles.htm

5. Martinez, C.E., Ritchie, L.D., Lee, D.L., Tsai, M.M., Anderson, C.E., & Whaley, S.E. (2022). California WIC Participants Report Favorable Impacts of the COVID-Related Increase to the WIC Cash Value Benefit. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(17), 10604.