

# Memorandum



CITY OF DALLAS

DATE June 4, 2021

TO Honorable Members of the Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 Recovery and Assistance

SUBJECT **WIC Program and Reopening Update**

In light of the cancellation of the planned Quality of Life Committee meeting in which the Office of Community Care was scheduled to provide an update on the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, this memo serves as such update. This memo provides an overview of the WIC program and its impact on participants in Dallas County, including information on current eligibility requirements and operations in Dallas, adjustments to service delivery during COVID, and reopening and future plans.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, popularly known as WIC, was established to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk. The program provides nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health care services. WIC is administered at the federal level by the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture, which provides funding to the States for program operations. The Health and Human Services Commission in Texas distributes these funds to a variety of state and local organizations, which are known as “local agencies”. The Local Agency 07 program contract has been administered by the City of Dallas since 1976 and serves citizens throughout Dallas County. WIC provides services at 16 clinic sites in Dallas County, 10 of which are within the city of Dallas.

### *WIC Eligibility*

WIC applicants must meet multiple criteria to be considered eligible for WIC services. These include categorical requirements (women who are pregnant, postpartum women up to 6 months after the birth of an infant or end of pregnancy, breastfeeding women up to infant’s first birthday, and children up to 5th birthday), residential (Texas resident), and income (up to 185% of Federal Poverty Guidelines). WIC is designed to serve clients with nutrition risk, meaning that the individual has a medical-based or dietary-based condition, such as anemia, underweight, poor pregnancy, teen pregnancy, and poor diet. Applicants must be seen by a health professional such as a physician, nurse, or nutritionist to determine if the individual is at nutrition risk.

### *WIC Services*

WIC clients receive individual nutrition and breastfeeding counseling and/or classes every 3 months from trained WIC Educators, Nutritionists, Dietitians and Lactation Consultants depending on the individual needs. Many WIC clinics offer classes especially for children and family members are welcome. WIC offers a variety of breast pumps to breastfeeding participants and tailored monthly supplemental food packages to all WIC participants based on the latest nutrition guidelines for their participant category. The food packages include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low-fat milk, yogurt, and baby food in addition to cereal, eggs, juice, peanut butter and beans. The WIC program offers a variety of healthy foods to help parents make smart choices for their family. This summer the fruit and vegetable benefit has been

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increased to \$35 per participant per month, which will help families have quality food at home while children are out of school.

#### *WIC Outcomes*

Multiple studies have found that WIC participation is associated with improved birth outcomes and reductions in maternal and newborn health care costs after birth. WIC participation is also linked with longer gestation periods, higher birthweights and lower infant mortality.

#### *Participation Trends*

WIC participation has been trending downwards for several years. A large portion of the overall WIC program funding received by the City is based on participation rates. Explanations for these downward trends include lack of awareness among potentially eligible participants, fear of stigma or taking a spot from another potential WIC participant and ongoing confusion among many immigrant families that they may be penalized for accessing WIC services also contribute to decreased participation levels. State and local data reflect the City the has followed the same trend trajectory in participation the State and Nation have for the past several years. Over the last year and a half there has been less decrease and more stabilized participation month to month.

### **COVID OPERATIONS**

Maintaining operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has been uniquely challenging given the program model focus on in-person service, but the WIC team has worked harder than ever throughout the past year to provide these critical services during a time when our families needed it the most. WIC “Disaster Mode” allows for certain exemptions that enable amendments to the delivery model during COVID. The physically present participant requirements has been waived and WIC clinics have the ability to issue provisional benefits for up to 90 days and waive physical presence completely during pandemic certifications. In March 2020, Dallas WIC Clinics began closing and transitioning to telephone based service delivery and mailing benefits. Drive up car side service and and walk-up benefit issuance options were added once the team was able to implement them safely, beginning with largest sites and ultimately expanding to all but 2 WIC clinic locations. WIC Highland Hills and WIC MLK sites remain closed due to their locations (within a City building and within a medical clinic) but will reopen in part by the end of June 2020.

### **REOPENING PLANS**

The Public Health Emergency Declaration is still in effect allowing for the continued utilization of “Disaster Mode” operations. The next renewal date will be around August 20, 2021. If the Health and Human Services Secretary does not renew the declaration, per WIC Policy, COVID waivers will continue for another 30 days (thru about September 20), after which they will expire, and normal operations must resume. Between now and September, WIC clinics will continue providing walk up and drive up options and, in alignment with City reopening plans, will begin delivering in person services over the summer with appropriate distancing and limits in place.

### **FUTURE PLANNING**

WIC clinic staff have learned to provide most services including nutrition counseling and lactation consultations virtually and participants will continue to be offered the flexibility of this option in many situations moving forward. Since January 2020, WIC has been working in partnership with Child Poverty Action Lab to deploy AmeriCorps VISTAS to plan mobile pop-up WIC routes to reach participants near their neighborhoods and in places they may already visit.

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Some of these had launched just before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, and the WIC team looks forward to bringing these new models fully into fruition moving forward.

WIC clinics have been working to transition the clinic service model by making over "WIC Guest Rooms" where all in person certification services can be provided to participants in their own room. Participants will be able to remain in one room during their appointment, rather than travelling from room to room for each service. Rooms will be fruit or veggie themed with activities and toys that increase awareness of fruit and veggies but also provide a fun atmosphere. Our client research and feedback showed that the old style of moving families from the lobby to a certification office to a lab to a waiting room to a counseling office and then to check out was scary for kids and frustrating for moms. The hope is that families will be empowered to make healthier choices and long-lasting behavior changes after leaving an improved WIC experience.

Additionally, the WIC team has created new, relaxing breastfeeding rooms where participants can breastfeed and talk together have been created. If breastfeeding moms need more help, there are private breast-feeding rooms where a breastfeeding counselor can provide support. Some WIC sites plan to build low raised garden beds to grow salad vegetables and get WIC families involved. WIC offers extended morning, evening and weekend hours at larger locations to accommodate working families, moms who can only get a ride on Saturday or participants that prefer these hours.

For the remainder of FY21 and through FY22, WIC will work to increase accessibility and individualization of WIC client services in the community through innovative virtual, mobile, and clinical delivery options. Staff will strive to provide continuity of hospitality at all WIC access points that consistently delivers a high-quality experience for guests and concludes each interaction on a positive motivating note. WIC leadership will continue developing a staffing model designed to enhance the well-being and satisfaction of WIC employees through training, retraining and cross training to develop knowledge and skills for success when providing client services.

### **UPCOMING AGENDA ITEM**

On June 23, 2021, City Council will consider an item to accept an additional \$225,958 to support Lactation Services, Improving the Client Experience and Extra funds to support the delivery of WIC services for the remainder of FY21, bringing the total FY21 not to exceed amount to \$15,740,206.

OCC will continue to provide updates at Ad Hoc Committee meetings. If you have any questions regarding any of the above programs, please contact me or Office of Community Care Director, Jessica Galleshaw



Kimberly Bizzor Tolbert  
Chief of Staff to the City Manager

c: T.C. Broadnax, City Manager  
Chris Caso, City Attorney  
Mark Swann, City Auditor  
Billerae Johnson, City Secretary  
Preston Robinson, Administrative Judge  
Majed A. Al-Ghafry, Assistant City Manager  
Jon Fortune, Assistant City Manager  
Joey Zapata, Assistant City Manager  
Dr. Eric A. Johnson, Chief of Economic Development and Neighborhood Services  
M. Elizabeth Reich, Chief Financial Officer  
M. Elizabeth (Liz) Cedillo-Pereira, Chief of Equity and Inclusion  
Directors and Assistant Directors