

# Conducting Remote Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Certification Appointments During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Findings From Surveys of WIC State and Local Agencies (Summary)

## Background

Under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act of 2020 (FFCRA, P.L. 116-127), the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) had the authority to grant certain programmatic waivers to State agencies that administer the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). FNS issued waivers to provide flexibilities to requirements that could not be met as a result of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic (the "pandemic") and support continued access to WIC services. By the time FFCRA waiver authority ended on September 30, 2021, FNS had approved 16 types of WIC waivers and 831 individual waiver requests across the 89 WIC State agencies.

This report summarizes the reported use and impact of the physical presence waiver, which waived the statutory requirement that participants be physically present to be certified as eligible for WIC, allowing WIC State and local agencies to remotely certify participants and defer anthropometric (i.e., height, weight) and bloodwork requirements needed to determine nutritional risk for the period the waiver is in effect. Prior to FFCRA, only limited exceptions to the requirement were granted through waivers under the Child Nutrition Act (42 U.S.C. 1786(d)(3)(C)(i)).

The FFCRA also stipulated reporting requirements for the waivers. Within 12 months of receiving a waiver, State agencies were required to summarize their use of each implemented waiver and describe whether the waiver helped improve services for WIC participants. The physical presence waiver had similar reporting requirements for local agencies.

## Methods

FNS developed State and local agency surveys to capture the information needed to fulfill the FFCRA waiver reporting requirements. The surveys were fielded in March and April 2021 to all 89 WIC State agencies and a census of WIC local agencies. Findings reflect the use of the waivers at the time of data collection.

The State agency survey gathered information about the use and impact of the 16 WIC waivers issued by FNS under the FFCRA. All 89 State agencies completed the survey. The local agency survey gathered information on the use and

impact of the physical presence waiver. Almost all local agencies across the 89 State agencies (1,833 of 1,891; 96.9 percent) completed the survey.

## Findings

**In response to the pandemic, almost all (1,807 of 1,833; 98.6 percent) WIC local agencies offered remote certification appointments to participants; before the pandemic, only 219 local agencies (11.9 percent) did so.** The physical presence waiver was used by 88 of the 89 WIC State agencies and 88 State agencies were still using the waiver in March 2021.

## Key Findings

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all (98.6 percent) WIC local agencies offered remote certification appointments to participants; before the pandemic, only 11.9 percent of WIC local agencies did so.
- Nearly all WIC local agencies (98.5 percent) offered certification appointments by telephone, 22.0 percent continued to offer in-person appointments, and 11.1 percent used video call platforms.
- Almost all WIC State (94.3 percent) and local (87.5 percent) agencies reported the physical presence waiver was extremely important to ensuring WIC participants received quality WIC services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Although most WIC local agencies (82.0 percent) found the transition to remote services to be at least slightly challenging, only a few WIC local agencies (5.0 percent) found it to be very or extremely challenging.

**Almost all local agencies (98.5 percent) used telephone calls to conduct WIC certification appointments remotely.** Only 11.1 percent used video calls (e.g., Skype, Zoom). About one-fifth of local agencies (22.0 percent) continued to provide in-person appointments as of March 2021, but local agency staff feedback suggests that most WIC participants still preferred to conduct certification appointments over the phone.

**Local agencies used a variety of means to collect required documentation to determine eligibility at certification.** For example, most local agencies used Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Medicaid databases to obtain proof of adjunctive eligibility (87.2 percent) or proof of income (78.0 percent). Local agencies also commonly accepted income documentation by email, in-person drop-off, and text message (71.0, 61.9, and 48.1 percent, respectively). Most local agencies reported allowing WIC participants to defer providing documentation related to height/weight and bloodwork (86.4 and 91.6 percent, respectively).

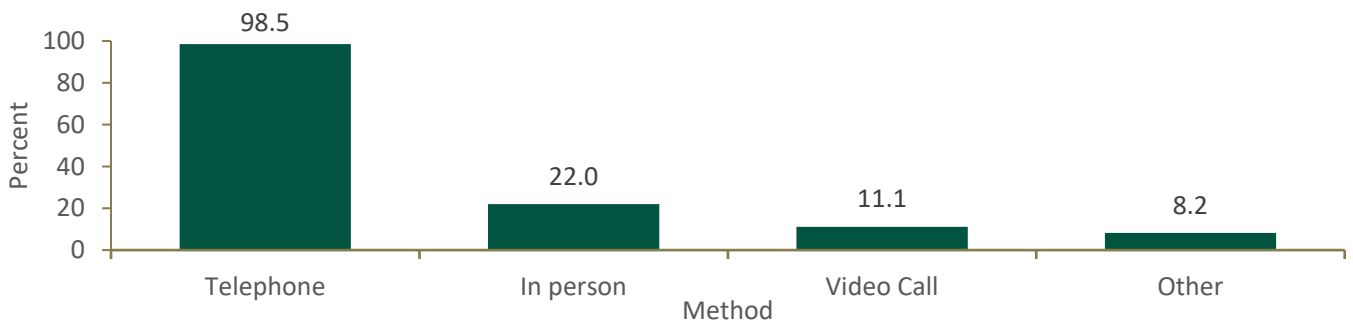
**Although nearly all local agencies reported previously offering remote options for nutrition education and breastfeeding support, the overall availability and variety of remote options increased during the pandemic.** Compared to before the pandemic, the overall percentage of local agencies offering any remote options increased for nutrition education (from 84.4 percent to 96.8 percent) and breastfeeding counseling (from 86.0 percent to 94.6 percent). During the pandemic, most local agencies offered nutrition education and breastfeeding counseling via live one-on-one telephone calls (89.8 percent and 85.6 percent, respectively), mailed hardcopy reading materials (69.0 percent and 67.7 percent, respectively), and online

reading materials (52.5 percent and 59.5 percent, respectively). Availability of one-on-one video calls saw the largest relative change during the pandemic, increasing in use from 2.8 percent to 19.3 percent of local agencies for nutrition education and from 5.8 percent to 29.9 percent for breastfeeding counseling (relatively large gains compared to 11.1 percent usage of video calls for remote certifications).

**Almost all State (94.3 percent) and local (87.5 percent) agencies reported the physical presence waiver was extremely important to ensuring participants received quality WIC services during the pandemic.** All State and almost all local agencies reported the waiver kept WIC participants and staff safe and made WIC more accessible when being physically present was difficult. Over 90 percent of State and local agencies reported the waiver made WIC more convenient for participants' schedules; in open text responses, respondents specifically noted the waiver helped alleviate barriers such as transportation, childcare, and scheduling restrictions for working parents. Over 80 percent of State agencies and over 90 percent of local agencies also reported that the waiver improved access to food for WIC participants during the pandemic.

**Although most local agencies (82.0 percent) found the transition to remote services to be at least slightly challenging, few local agencies (5.0 percent) found it to be very or extremely challenging.** WIC local agencies most commonly reported that it was challenging to get in touch with participants remotely (70.6 percent) and communicate changes to participants (54.4 percent). Reported challenges did not vary by local agency urbanicity.

**Figure 1: Methods Used by Local Agencies To Conduct Certification Appointments During the COVID-19 Pandemic**



Note: Local agencies could select multiple response options. Responses reflect local agency operations as of March 2021.

**For More Information:**

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