

When natural disasters strike, such as, hurricanes, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and tornados, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) can employ special “alternative procedures” to help WIC clients and those newly eligible receive timely access to WIC benefits and services.¹ During a disaster, it is crucial to preserve access to WIC food benefits, nutrition and breastfeeding support, and referrals to services. In many low-income communities affected by a disaster, a significant proportion of pregnant women, infants and new mothers are WIC participants. In the disaster zone, the number of people who are eligible for WIC will increase due to the loss of family income, housing, and food security.

When there is a Presidential Declaration of a disaster, authority provided in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act allows the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to provide administrative programmatic flexibilities on a case-by-case basis when a request is made by a WIC State agency. These flexibilities are in addition to [WIC waivers established during COVID-19](#). Recommended strategies include State WIC agencies preparing disaster plans; utilizing “alternate procedure” options for WIC food package and redemption flexibilities, benefit replacement, and simplified income eligibility as approved and necessary; continuing WIC services including COVID-19 options for remote enrollment; and partners disseminating WIC disaster access information to impacted communities.

Recommendations

State WIC agencies should prepare disaster plans to help ensure the continued delivery of WIC benefits to existing recipients as well as outreach to potentially newly eligible individuals.

USDA strongly encourages State WIC agencies to prepare disaster plans to ensure the continued delivery of WIC benefits to existing recipients as well as outreach to individuals that are newly eligible as a result of the emergency. However, many states do not have a plan.

The WIC disaster plan should include the full range of appropriate “alternative procedure” options that State and local WIC agencies could employ to continue services in federally declared disaster areas. With a plan, it is easier for a WIC State agency to submit a request seeking USDA’s approval for the appropriate “alternative procedures” during the disaster. The use of “alternative procedures” will depend on the nature of the disaster and its impact which will also dictate the administrative programmatic flexibilities USDA will approve. USDA’s Guide to Coordinating WIC Services During Disaster is an important resource² for WIC and partners working on a disaster plan.

State and local WIC agencies should employ options for WIC food package and redemption flexibilities and options for benefit replacement as necessary in disasters.

To accommodate disaster conditions, such as a loss of refrigeration or the presence of unsafe drinking water, WIC can modify WIC food package components by issuing, for example, ready-to-feed infant formula, shelf-stable milk, or smaller packages of other food items. For WIC shoppers in stores with reduced stock, WIC can allow substitutions for missing items, offering flexibility regarding the types (e.g., full-fat or low-fat milk if non-fat milk is not available), brands, and sizes of WIC foods. State WIC agencies can also exercise their authority to include a lost WIC benefits replacement policy as part of their disaster plans. By replacing lost, unredeemed WIC food vouchers, pro-rated for the remainder of the month, WIC restores a vital benefit when WIC clients need it most.

State and local WIC agencies must continue WIC services by offering options for enrollment via phone or telehealth established during COVID-19 and, where appropriate, using existing or temporary WIC clinics.

USDA strongly discourages the suspension of WIC services during disasters because the program is regarded as an adjunct to health care, and it is considered to be a vital service during a disaster.

During COVID-19 WIC can enroll and provide services via phone and telehealth. Where appropriate during a disaster, WIC can establish temporary WIC clinics using mobile equipment to provide certification and benefit issuance services to WIC participants in the disaster area. Also, within the disaster area, existing clinics that remain operational can sometimes expand their caseload to accommodate clients and applicants from closed clinics. Outside the disaster zone, WIC should be prepared to serve WIC clients displaced from their homes if adjoining counties, states, or territories have been declared a disaster. Partners can offer space for temporary clinics.

State and local WIC agencies should utilize options to offer simplified income eligibility and flexibility around certification periods.

WIC can simplify eligibility procedures by allowing disaster-impacted families to qualify for WIC by signing a “self-declaration” form to demonstrate that they are income eligible. This accommodates the many people who lose their income documentation during a disaster. Using automatic income eligibility for applicants who are newly enrolled in the Disaster-SNAP program (SNAP for people in disaster areas) will simplify the process. During a disaster, WIC can shorten or extend WIC eligibility certification periods by up to 30 days. This can streamline the WIC certification process. Extending WIC re-certification due dates by 30 days can also remove unnecessary hardship on current participants. These options can also streamline the workload for WIC staff during disasters, potentially allowing them to meet the increased need for WIC.

Offering WIC nutrition and breastfeeding support and services is a vital support for individuals during disasters.

WIC can respond to disasters by offering special breastfeeding support hotlines for individuals who have been impacted by a disaster, providing in-clinic nutrition education and counseling on relevant food and water safety issues, and educating participants on the impact of disaster-related trauma on infant and child feeding behaviors and eating patterns. WIC also can modify nutrition education requirements. For example, WIC can consolidate the number of nutrition contacts needed or offer lessons that can be completed on-line or off-site from the WIC clinic (e.g. at home). Lessons can be shared in hard copy format if electricity and digital communications networks are not functioning.

Relevant agencies and WIC should coordinate to offer referrals to needed disaster services.

In response to a disaster, WIC can fulfill its important function of connecting participants to services by making referrals to SNAP and the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) emergency services. Disaster SNAP (D-SNAP) benefits are a primary source of food for families impacted by disasters. The FEMA’s emergency services state and regional planning process should include state WIC and SNAP agencies.

Partnering organizations and WIC should widely disseminate WIC disaster services and policy information to impacted communities and populations.

State WIC agencies should use the [State WIC toll-free phone number](#), website, texting systems, and social media to help WIC clients who are displaced by disasters to know how to enroll and receive remote services available during COVID-19, to locate the nearest open WIC clinic, and to keep updated on WIC’s disaster policies. State and local agency disaster communications should be issued in the primary languages used by WIC applicants and participants. Advocates can facilitate access to WIC during a disaster by fully utilizing their networks to share WIC’s toll-free numbers, the process for connecting to remote enrollment and services during COVID-19, the location of open or temporary WIC clinics, relevant WIC nutrition services, such as breastfeeding hotlines, and any other “alternative procedures” approved by USDA for the state to use to facilitate access to WIC benefits.



Spotlight: Following Hurricane Harvey in Texas in 2017, the State WIC agency consulted with USDA for the appropriate administrative programmatic flexibilities and implemented their Texas WIC disaster plan.³ Temporary mobile clinics were deployed to provide services to WIC clients while regular clinics were flooded or without electricity. WIC offered pro-rated benefit replacement for WIC clients who had been evacuated and left behind their WIC card, food, or formula benefits. Food package flexibilities were granted, allowing WIC participants without access to clean water to get ready-to-feed formula for their infants, and WIC shoppers in stores with reduced stock to bypass some of the usual restrictions on package sizes, brands, and types.

Texas WIC acted quickly to use its website and Facebook page to post hurricane Harvey WIC updates in English

and Spanish, including the toll-free numbers and some of the special disaster options. The disaster WIC information was also communicated through WIC clinics, WIC-authorized stores, disaster aid/volunteer workers, and the anti-hunger advocacy network. WIC-authorized stores were notified of the food package flexibilities through a notice sent via e-mail as part of the “Vendor News Flash”.⁴ The Texas anti-hunger organization, Center for Public Policy Priorities, pushed disaster assistance information for WIC, SNAP, and school meals through their robust network.

For more information on federal nutrition programs during disasters see FRAC’s [Leveraging Federal Nutrition Resources for Disaster Recovery in COVID-19](#) webpage.



¹ Garnett, S. (1995.) “WIC Policy Memorandum 95-9: WIC Disaster Policy and Coordination” (February 24, 1995) and “WIC Policy Memorandum 95-9A: Revision of WIC Disaster Policy and Coordination” (December 29, 1995). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service.

² U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2017). Guide to Coordinating WIC Services During Disaster. Available at: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/disaster/guide-coordinating-wic-services-during-disaster>

³ Texas Department of State Health Services. (2020). Memo regarding Procedures for Disaster Situations. Available at: <https://www.dshs.texas.gov/WIC/memos/2020/20009.pdf>

⁴ A list of the Texas Department of State Health Services, WIC agency’s News Vendor Flashes, including the ones on natural disaster relief, are available at: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/doing-business-hhs/provider-portals/wic-providers/vendor-management-operations-unit/wic-vendor-communications>