

29 February 2012

The Honorable FIRST LAST
U.S. House of Representatives/U.S. Senate
ROOM BUILDING
Washington, DC ZIP

Dear SENATOR/REPRESENTATIVE LAST:

As Congress considers the FY2013 Budget Resolution and Agriculture Appropriations, we strongly urge you to reject any funding cuts that will damage the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). While there are signs of economic recovery, sustained high unemployment and underemployment require that vulnerable mothers and young children continue to receive WIC's critical nutrition assistance and healthcare services.

The President has proposed to fully fund WIC at \$7.041 billion, providing \$14 million for infrastructure, \$30 million in support of cost containment and program integrity for management information systems (MIS) and electronic benefit service delivery (EBT), and \$60 million for breastfeeding peer counselors.

Under the Budget Control Act of 2011, WIC is slated for automatic cuts in FY 2013 as it is not a program that is protected from sequestration. This could result in over 800,000 mothers and young children losing critical nutrition benefits. Rather than allowing a sequester to go into effect and critical WIC funds to be cut, Congress should agree to a balanced deficit reduction package to replace the sequester and protect low-income programs, particularly WIC, from any funding cuts.

For 36 years, WIC has received strong bipartisan support in Congress. WIC is a well-respected and highly regarded program that elicits support across political, ideological, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. Voters oppose cutting funding for WIC. A national survey of 1,000 likely November 2012 voters indicated nearly 3 in 4 Americans want WIC funding to remain the same or increase with nearly twice as many favoring an increase as wanting a reduction.

WIC is a short-term, mission-driven preventive public health nutrition program designed to influence lifetime nutrition and health behaviors in a targeted, high-risk population. WIC provides nutrition and breastfeeding education, nutritious foods, and improved healthcare access for low- and moderate -income women and children with, or at risk of developing, nutrition-related health problems. Nationally, WIC serves approximately 9 million mothers and young children per month, including 53% of all infants in the U.S.

WIC is effective, providing significant returns on investment and is itself a deficit reduction strategy.

- WIC improves the consumption of key nutrients, improves pregnancy results, and substantially reduces the likelihood of adverse birth outcomes which mean fewer premature births, fewer low birth-weight babies, and fewer fetal and infant deaths. It has also been shown to improve at-risk children's health, growth and development and prevent health problems. Investing a small amount in WIC now results in significant health care cost savings in the future.
- Preterm births cost the U.S. over \$26 billion a year, with average first year medical costs for a premature/low birth-weight baby of \$49,033 compared to \$4,551 for a baby born without complications. It costs approximately \$743 a year for a pregnant woman to participate in WIC with an average participation length of 13 months. For every dollar spent on a pregnant woman in WIC, up to \$4.21 is saved in Medicaid.
- Participation in WIC's prenatal counseling program is associated with an increased rate of breastfeeding initiation. In 2010, survey data indicated that 63% of WIC infants ages 6-13 months were breastfed up from 41% in 1998. Funding for WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counselors has helped to improve breastfeeding initiation and duration rates. It has been estimated that a minimum of \$3.6 billion would be saved if current US exclusive breastfeeding rates increased to at least 50% at 6 months old.

- WIC children have increased intakes of important nutrients for cognitive and physical development like iron, potassium, and fiber, and they have lower rates of anemia. In addition, four- and five-year-olds whose mothers participated in WIC during pregnancy have better vocabulary test scores than children whose mothers had not received WIC benefits. WIC nutrition education has been shown to lead to an increased consumption of whole grains, fruits, and lower-fat milk, and participation in WIC has been shown to reduce the risk of child abuse or neglect.

WIC is efficiently run with administrative costs, according to the USDA, averaging 9%, nationally.

WIC is entrepreneurial, funding approximately 25% of its food costs through cost-containment initiatives and not federal resources. In fiscal year 2010, \$1.7 billion in federal savings were generated through competitive bidding for infant formula and other cost containment initiatives to support approximately 1.9 million participants.

WIC increases demand for healthy food in local retail stores, encouraging them to stock WIC authorized and healthier foods making WIC healthy foods accessible to others in the community. In 2010, \$6.25 billion worth of WIC food benefits were spent in local economies.

With already low administrative costs and effective cost containment strategies, cutting funding from WIC means cutting mothers and young children off of the program and depriving young children of a healthy start on life and the opportunity to thrive. Cutting funding from WIC in the short-term will result in long-term health and economic consequences for the country.

No one denies that our nation is facing fiscal challenges, but balancing the budget on the backs of vulnerable, at-risk, low-income mothers and young children that need essential food and nutrition assistance is not the way to achieve financial or national security. We urge you to do everything in your power to protect our nation's struggling families from hunger and improve their nutritional health and well-being. As an efficient, entrepreneurial, and effective program that provides significant returns on investment and is itself a deficit reduction strategy, we strongly urge you to reject any funding cuts to WIC and the other nutrition programs and urge you to support the President's WIC budget request.

Sincerely,

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
American Academy of Pediatrics
March of Dimes
National WIC Association