

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3205

November 30, 2020

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-307, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Patrick Leahy
Vice Chairman
Committee on Appropriations
United States Senate
S-128, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
Committee on Appropriations
U.S. House of Representatives
H-307, United States Capitol
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Shelby, Vice Chairman Leahy, Chairwoman Lowey, and Ranking Member Granger:

We respectfully ask that you fully fund the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in the final Fiscal Year 2021 Agriculture Appropriations bill at \$6 billion which is consistent with the Senate funding level for FY 2021. Fully funding WIC ensures that no eligible applicants are turned away and that the program has funds to ensure timely and responsible program management and reasonable staffing levels.

We also urge you to adopt the House funding level of \$20 million in discretionary funding for the WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) in FY 2021. WIC FMNP provides low-income pregnant and postpartum women with coupons or electronic benefits to buy fresh produce from authorized farmers and farmers markets.

After years of declining caseload, WIC providers are reporting increased participation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic disruption. New York alone has seen a 3 percent increase in caseload since February 2020, although other states are reporting double digit increases (i.e., North Carolina at 20 percent, Kentucky at 17 percent, Indiana at 15 percent, etc.).

This \$6 billion in overall budget authority for WIC is the same funding level provided in the final FY 2020 appropriations package that was passed in December 2019. This funding level would ensure that WIC is able to serve all eligible participants without resorting to waiting lists, respond adequately to the increasing program participation, adjust for rising food costs due to

tariffs and inflation, and assure responsible staffing levels throughout the pandemic. Consistent WIC funding levels is essential to provide adequate Nutrition Services and Administration (NSA) grants to states, allowing for robust public health programming, accounting for the rising costs of retaining credentialed nutrition professional staff, and managing the new costs of maintaining new electronic-benefit transfer systems, adopted pursuant to the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. NSA funding has been especially depleted as WIC programs assumed additional costs throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including structural modifications to clinics and additional technology for staff to conduct remote services.

While this funding is a necessary step toward meeting program needs, the continued economic uncertainty and unclear participation trajectories may require additional investments. We urge appropriators to continue to monitor participation trends in the weeks ahead and, as necessary, include additional funding in any subsequent COVID response packages.

Within the \$6 billion of overall funding for WIC, we urge you to provide dedicated set-aside funding for the following purposes. The requested set aside funding is consistent with both the Senate and House Agriculture appropriations funding levels:

- **\$90 million for breastfeeding peer counselors as provided in the Senate and House FY 2021 Agriculture Appropriations bills:** WIC’s highly successful Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program is associated with increasing three key breastfeeding metrics: initiation, duration, and exclusivity.¹ After nearly a decade of flat-funding, the final FY 2020 appropriations package expanded the federal investment by 50 percent to \$90 million. This historic increase is being put to use to resolve significant coverage gaps, particularly affecting rural states – both creating jobs throughout the pandemic while also ensuring a vital touchpoint for participants as the program adapts during this uncertain time. We urge Congress to continue its investment in WIC’s breastfeeding promotion and support, ensuring that every eligible pregnant woman and postpartum mother has access to peer-to-peer support.
- **\$14 million for infrastructure as provided in the Senate and House FY 2021 Agriculture Appropriations bills:** Congress has consistently funded the infrastructure set-aside, which supports brick-and-mortar infrastructure repairs and improvements, special breastfeeding projects, and WIC’s competitive grants for innovative special projects to improve and streamline WIC service delivery. State agencies rely on special project grant funding to support tailored projects to enhance program access, including retention of younger children (aged 2-4), addressing transportation barriers in rural communities, and exploring telehealth technologies.

In addition to providing healthy foods, WIC provides critical health and social service referrals. As a result, children enrolled in WIC are more likely to be immunized on time, consume key nutrients, and have higher cognitive development scores than their peers not participating in WIC. Breastfeeding rates among WIC women are at record highs—71 percent initiation and a high of 31 percent at 6 months. Removing families from the program as a result of funding cuts

¹ Min Lee CH, O’Leary J, Kirk P, Lower T (2018) Breastfeeding Outcomes in Washington State: Determining the Effect of Loving Support Peer Counseling Program and Characteristics of Participants at WIC Agencies. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 50(4), pg. 379-387. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S149940461730876X>.

deprives young children of access to healthy food, a healthy start in life, and the opportunity to thrive.

We strongly urge you to fully fund WIC and WIC FMNP in the FY2021 Agriculture Appropriations bill to continue protecting low-income women, infants, and children from hunger and improve their ability to access nutritious, balanced diets. Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Kirsten Gillibrand
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator

/s/ Cory A. Booker
Cory A. Booker
United States Senator

/s/ Jack Reed
Jack Reed
United States Senator

/s/ Sherrod Brown
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Debbie Stabenow
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator

/s/ Bernard Sanders
Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Kyrsten Sinema
Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator

/s/ Tina Smith
Tina Smith
United States Senator

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin
Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

/s/ Robert P. Casey, Jr.
Robert P. Casey, Jr.
United States Senator

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Margaret Wood Hassan
Margaret Wood Hassan
United States Senator