

Policy Briefing Paper

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Nutritional Assistance in Hartford: Why Are Fewer Stores Authorized to Participate in WIC?

Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is a federally funded program designed to improve the wellbeing of expectant and recent mothers, infants, and children under five. For families matching these categories who have limited incomes and are at risk of poor nutrition, WIC provides checks that can be redeemed for healthy food items at designated stores. This direct food assistance is reinforced by educational classes to promote breastfeeding and nutritious eating habits, referrals to health care and social service providers, and other activities to help new mothers and their children get off to a healthy start. WIC is widely regarded by child health advocates as a successful program. Decades of research and evaluation have found that WIC participants achieve better birth and health outcomes while reducing financial costs to the public through Medicaid savings.¹

WIC is an especially important resource in Hartford, one of the nation's poorest cities, where the prevalence of diet-related diseases is high and hunger is a reality for many residents. Among all US cities with populations above 100,000, Hartford has the fourth lowest median household income and the second highest poverty rate.² Yet

WIC is becoming increasingly difficult to use in Hartford due to a sharp drop in the number of eligible stores that can redeem WIC checks.

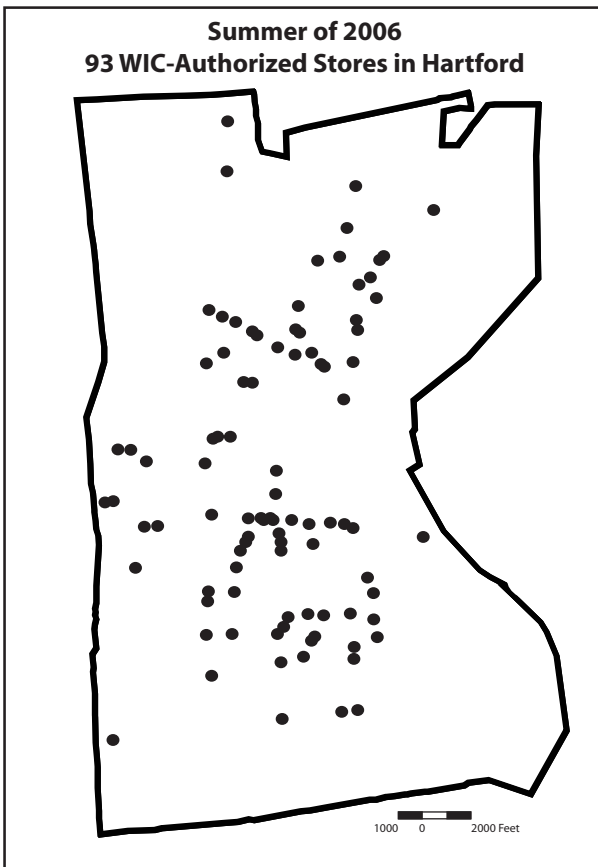
In 2008, the Spanish American Merchants Association and Association of Grocers of Connecticut began to express concerns about how this reduction in WIC access was adversely affecting urban grocery merchants and their customers. This *Policy Briefing Paper* builds on the earlier work of these two organizations.

Store Certification in the WIC Program

WIC is administered at three levels of government. On the federal level, Congress appropriates funding for the program and USDA is responsible for regulatory oversight of 88 state, tribal, and territorial WIC agencies. State WIC agencies are charged with implementing these federal regulations and deciding which food items meet program requirements, how to structure the delivery system for food assistance, and how WIC services should be organized within the state. Program enrollment and nutritional education are usually provided on the municipal level by approximately 2,000 local WIC agencies, in most cases city or county health departments. In Connecticut, authorization of WIC vendors is the sole responsibility of the state WIC program.³



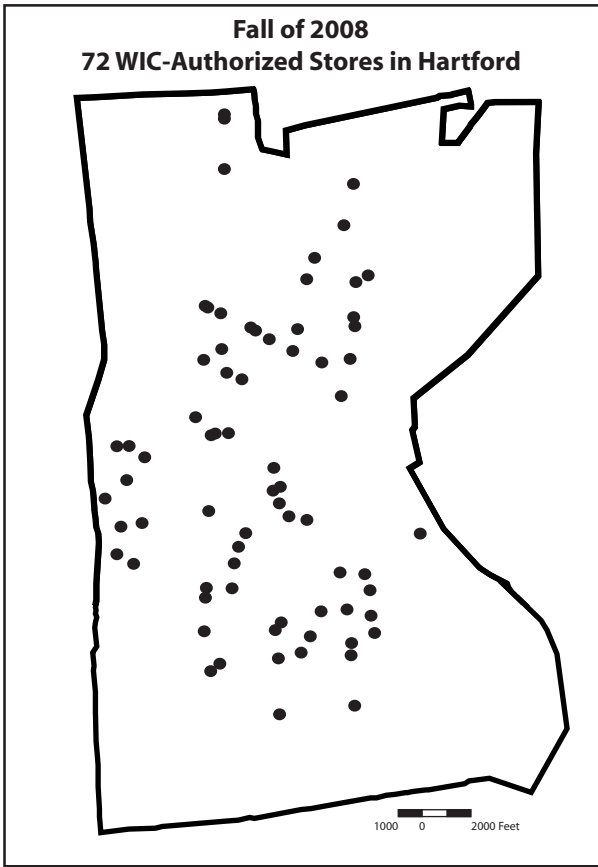
El Mercado (above) and El Gitano (below) are two grocery stores that have been barred recently from participation in the WIC program by state officials.



The selection of particular grocery stores to redeem WIC checks is guided by several criteria. Authorized stores are expected to stock the right food items in sufficient quantities, maintain competitive prices so that the government is not overcharged, and demonstrate business integrity to ensure that the program is not defrauded or abused. State WIC agencies are expected to authorize enough stores to give WIC participants adequate access to use their food benefits.

In Hartford, the number of WIC authorized stores has dropped significantly over the past two years. As shown on the maps to the left, 93 vendors participated in the WIC program during the summer of 2006. By September 2008, this store list had decreased to 72 vendors, representing a 22.6% reduction.

This downward trend can be attributed to increased scrutiny of participating stores by state WIC administrators and a reluctance to approve new applications. In several cases, the absence of a single jar of peanut butter or infant formula below the minimum stocking requirements has been viewed as sufficient reason to expel stores from the program.⁴ Stores must also reapply to the WIC program whenever there is a change in ownership. Many new owners whose stores were allowed to participate in WIC under previous management have been told by the state that they are too close to other vendors already in the program.⁵



If such a “proximity” policy is in effect, it has been applied inconsistently over the past two years. As the maps show, the general distribution of WIC stores has shifted only slightly while the overall number of stores has declined. Thirty six vendors left the WIC program during the 2006-2008 period while 15 new ones have joined, and many of these new stores are within a few blocks of other WIC authorized vendors. Any policy designed to disperse the locations of WIC vendors in Hartford has not succeeded and seems to have been applied selectively.

Instead, the effect of these administrative decisions has been to make WIC less accessible in the parts of the city where it is most needed. Over the past two years, 13 census tracts in Hartford experienced a reduction of authorized stores while 4 census tracts saw an increase in the number of stores. Among the census tracts that lost WIC authorized stores, a greater percentage of children under five live below the poverty line (33.7%) than the city as a whole (30.6%).

By contrast, the 4 census tracts that gained WIC stores have a lower percentage of children under five living in poverty (24.9%) than the citywide average.⁶

Other social indicators relevant to the purposes of the WIC program confirm this pattern as well. For example, census tracts that lost WIC stores have a greater percentage of female headed households (34.5%) than Hartford as a whole (30.1%) or census tracts that gained stores (28.8%). Similarly, a greater percentage of households in census tracts losing stores receive public assistance (17.5%) than the citywide average (15.7%) or census tracts gaining WIC authorized stores (11.8%) over this same period.⁷ These statistics show that Hartford residents not only have fewer places to redeem WIC checks than before, but that the loss of stores has been concentrated in areas of the city where the program ought to be intensifying its efforts.

Access to Nutritious Foods

Proximity to grocery stores is especially important for a nutrition program that serves low-income mothers of young children. In a city where 36.1% of households do not own a car, many people rely on neighborhood retailers for their

“There are times when I have to cut down on the formula and replace it with baby food in order to make it last until I can get to the store. Other times my checks become overdue, due to not having a ride to the store.”

***Magda Reyes,
a 30-year old
with two children***

routine grocery shopping.⁸ Mothers are unlikely to walk long distances with their children to redeem WIC benefits, nor is it reasonable for such families to pass several food stores along the way where their checks cannot be used.

The consequence of inadequate access to WIC vendors is that food benefits are not used and the program ceases to meet its goal of providing good nutrition to participants. Faced with the prospect of an evening journey on foot with a newborn baby, some mothers who have unexpectedly run out of infant formula will make the choice to dilute whole milk or use home-made rice milk as a substitute. Frozen juice concentrates and liquids are heavy to carry for long distances, so toddlers are more likely to receive unhealthy beverages from the corner store than 100% juice from a distant WIC vendor. Preschoolers at risk of childhood obesity are often able to argue more successfully for sugar cereal when WIC checks cannot be redeemed for healthy cereal at the neighborhood bodega.

Beyond these individual choices, the inadequate distribution of WIC vendors has an adverse impact on the grocery retail sector throughout the city. Bodegas and corner stores are reluctant to stock nutritious items like tuna, carrots, and hot cereals when they are unable to participate in the program, since customers with WIC checks can get these products elsewhere at no cost. Excessive barriers to WIC participation create an incentive for stores left out of the program to focus instead on snack foods and soda as a means to generate revenue, contributing to unhealthy lifestyles in a city that is already struggling with near epidemic rates of diet-related diseases. And for those Hartford stores lucky enough to participate in the WIC program, lack of competition for certain food sales can distort normal pricing based on supply and demand. Higher prices for subsidized food that result from this restricted competition are borne by the government.

Other Implications for Hartford

At the same time that state WIC policies are constraining opportunities to use food benefits in Hartford, city officials are working harder than ever to make the program a success. The City of

“Not being able to redeem my checks has forced me to feed my baby diluted regular milk until I am able to redeem my checks.”

***Tiffany Dominguez,
a 21-year old
with one child***

“Just yesterday I had to give my daughter regular milk because I couldn’t redeem my WIC checks.”

***Lashauna Bourne,
a 24-year old
with one child***

Hartford's WIC program does not administer store certifications. Instead, like other local WIC agencies it is responsible for enrolling clients and sponsoring nutritional education activities. The city program has been recognized as a model by state WIC administrators and received a 2007 Community Food Security Award by the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy. In 2008 the city WIC program was also instrumental in launching the North End Farmers Market in a disadvantaged area of Hartford. The city WIC program could do even more to serve the needs of Hartford residents if the state WIC program aligned itself to this same objective.

While the number of Hartford residents enrolled in WIC has fluctuated over the years, more than 9,000 participated last year. This figure is roughly equivalent to Hartford's average caseload in 1996. By contrast, Connecticut's statewide level of participation dropped by 14.9% over the same period while WIC participation nationwide rose by 15.3%.⁹

We urge policymakers to address this troubling decline in one of the state's most valuable tools to promote good nutrition among mothers and children. State administrators should allow Hartford WIC stores that have been disqualified from program participation due to problems in the application process or minimum stocking requirements to reapply as authorized vendors. State policies that have been used to deny vendors on the basis of minimum distance requirements between stores should also be abandoned.

Endnotes:

¹ The webpage "How WIC Helps" (<http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/aboutwic/howwichelps.htm>) maintained by USDA provides a bibliography of peer-reviewed research documenting the benefits of WIC.

² For median household income, see Welniak, Ed, and Kirby Posey (2005). *Household Income: 1999*. Census 2000 Brief C2KBR-36. US Census Bureau. For poverty rates, see Bishaw, Alemayehu and John Iceland (2003). *Poverty: 1999*. Census 2000 Brief C2KBR-19. US Census Bureau.

³ This sentence is taken verbatim from subsection 19a-59c-5(c) of the *Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies*.

⁴ Interviews with former WIC vendors. See also, "Gobernadora Rell firma ley que protege Licencias del programa WIC para las bodegas" by Hernando Diosa, *La Voz Hispana de Connecticut*, June 26, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Census 2000 Summary File 3 Population, Income and Housing: 2000, American Factfinder. (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) accessed December 2008.

⁷ Census 2000 Summary File 1 Household and Families and Summary File 3 Population, Income and Housing: 2000, American Factfinder. (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) accessed December 2008.

⁸ Census 2000 Summary File 3 Population, Income and Housing: 2000, American Factfinder. (<http://factfinder.census.gov>) accessed December 2008.

⁹ Historical WIC data for Hartford is reported in the 1996-1997 Annual Report of the City of Hartford Advisory Commission on Food Policy. State and national data is from Food and Nutrition Service, USDA.

HARTFORD FOOD SYSTEM

The mission of the Hartford Food System is to fight hunger and improve nutrition for disadvantaged members of our community through sustainable, non-emergency strategies.
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