

Changes in the WIC Food Packages

A Toolkit for Partnering with Neighborhood Stores



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This publication was developed through a partnership between Public Health Law & Policy (PHLP) and the California WIC Association (CWA).

Thanks to Joanna Winter for research assistance, and Bu Nygrens and Peggy da Silva of Veritable Vegetable for insight into the produce distribution business.

Graphic design by Karen Parry | Black Graphics

Photographs by William Mercer McLeod and courtesy of the California WIC Association, unless otherwise noted

Funded by The California Endowment

CWA is a nonprofit association formed in 1992 by local WIC directors to advocate for the improvement of the WIC program and to work for better health. For more information, see www.calwic.org.

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INTRODUCTION

A Call to Action

With limited time and resources, low-income families face many barriers to providing healthy meals for their children. Many California families live in neighborhoods where liquor stores proliferate and grocery stores are few. A recent study showed that California has more than four times as many fast food outlets and convenience stores as supermarkets and produce vendors,¹ and in many low-income communities, the ratio is skewed even further toward unhealthy food.

People who live in a neighborhood without access to grocery stores are less likely to have healthy diets,² thus increasing their risk of such diet-related diseases as high blood pressure, cancer, and diabetes.³ New research has found that low-income Californians living in neighborhoods where convenience stores and fast food predominate have significantly higher rates of obesity and diabetes.⁴

Since 1974, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (known as WIC) has provided checks redeemable for healthy foods to at-risk, low- to moderate-income women and children.⁵ In December 2007, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) changed the selection of foods available through the WIC program, known as the “food packages,” for the first time in 35 years. The new WIC food packages will include fresh fruits and vegetables, whole-grain cereals, and culturally appropriate foods such as whole wheat tortillas, soy beverages, and brown rice.

These changes hold potential to transform the retail food landscape in low-income communities across the state. Because all WIC vendors will be required by the new federal rules to stock their shelves with an array of products including fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products, whole grains, and soy foods, anyone shopping at a WIC-authorized store will have access to these healthy foods. This is especially important in neighborhoods where fresh and healthy foods are currently hard to find.



Photo by Lydia Damiller

For community food advocates and corner store owners alike, the WIC changes present an important opportunity. Neighborhood stores may be motivated to become authorized WIC vendors to attract a new customer base of WIC participants, who would shop for other foods and drive foot traffic to the store — and these retailers would be required to upgrade their offerings in accordance with the new, healthier WIC food packages.

These small neighborhood stores, however, may not have the infrastructure and knowledge to stock and sell affordable, quality fruits and vegetables. These vendors will need technical assistance to navigate the WIC vendor application process, improve their stock, and shift their business model.

Taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the new WIC food packages will require innovative partnerships between WIC agencies, program participants, retailers, and community food advocates. This toolkit is written for advocates looking to partner with small food retailers and local WIC programs to increase the availability of healthy food in underserved neighborhoods.

For advocates who are new to WIC, this toolkit provides a detailed overview of the program, the new WIC food packages, and the resources available to WIC-authorized vendors. It also outlines the major barriers neighborhood retailers face in sourcing fresh groceries and identifies a range of resources to overcome these challenges, from funding to technical assistance and information referrals.

For local WIC agency staff — who are not permitted to participate in business development activities, according to WIC program guidelines — this toolkit provides an overview of the resources available to help currently authorized WIC vendors successfully make the transition to the new food packages.

Families who rely on WIC food vouchers to make ends meet need convenient access to healthy food retail in their neighborhood. The new WIC food packages will not solve the food access problems many low-income residents face, but they provide an important incentive for retailers to increase the availability of healthy choices.

1 *Searching for Healthy Food: The Food Landscape in California Cities and Counties*, California Center for Public Health Advocacy, 2007.

2 Morland K, Wing S, and Diez Roux A. “The Contextual Effect of the Local Food Environment on Residents’ Diets: The Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities Study.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(11), 1761-1768.

3 Powell KE, Thompson PD, Caspersen CJ and Kendrick, JS. “Physical Activity and the Incidence of Coronary Heart Disease.” *Annual Review of Public Health*, 8, 253-287, 1987.

4 *Designed for Disease: The Link Between Local Food Environments and Diabetes and Obesity*, California Center for Public Health Advocacy, PolicyLink, and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, April 2008.

5 In California, the nation’s largest WIC program, 82 local agencies serve about 1.4 million participants at 650 local sites with a FY2008 allocation of nearly \$900 million. Approximately a quarter of the participants are pregnant and postpartum women, another quarter are infants, and about 50 percent are children ages 1 to 5. More than 60 percent of the infants born in California are served by the WIC program.

SECTION I

What Is WIC?

Created by Congress in 1974, WIC – officially known as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children – is a federal program designed to prevent hunger and improve health outcomes among vulnerable young children and their mothers. The WIC program provides participants with monthly food checks, nutrition education and breastfeeding support, and referrals to health and social services.

Dozens of studies have shown WIC’s value as a cost-effective public health intervention, preventing infant mortality, anemia, low birth weight, and other poor birth outcomes, as well as improving participants’ overall nutrition and health.

The California Department of Public Health administers the state’s WIC program through contracts with local agencies that deliver WIC services in every county. Approximately a quarter of the participants are pregnant and postpartum women, another quarter are infants, and about half are children ages 1 to 5. More than 60 percent of the infants born in California are served by the WIC program.

California WIC relies exclusively on federal funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which regulates the program. Current WIC funding is \$772 million for direct food expenditures, and \$316 million for local and state nutrition services.



Who Participates in WIC?

WIC serves low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, and infants and children up to age 5 who face nutritional risk due to food insecurity or other diet or medical problems. Many working families participate in WIC. Participants already enrolled in Medi-Cal, CalWORKS, or the federal program formerly known as “food stamps” (now the Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) are automatically qualified to receive WIC.

Nationwide, WIC currently serves more than 8.5 million individuals, including almost half of all infants born in the United States. California has the nation's largest WIC program, with 82 local agencies serving 1.44 million participants in more than 650 sites. While about half of these agencies are housed in city or county public health departments, the majority of the WIC caseload is served by a variety of nonprofit agencies, including community health centers, community action agencies, and Native American health clinics.

More than 60 percent of infants born in California receive WIC services. The caseload reflects California's diversity: most participants are Latino (77%), followed by Caucasian (9%), African American (6%), Asian (5%), and Native American (0.9%).

How Does the Program Work?

For a glossary of WIC terms, see the appendix of this toolkit.

Local WIC agencies issue WIC “food prescriptions” to program participants, tailoring the selection of allowable foods to individual dietary or medical needs. The California WIC program delivers these food benefits through checks (often called food instruments, or FIs) printed and issued at local WIC centers. Each participant receives a set of monthly checks, worth on average \$62, which can be redeemed only for specific nutritious foods listed on each check.

Participants can redeem their checks at any WIC-authorized store statewide, which must prominently display signage bearing the California WIC logo and a message indicating the store accepts WIC. Unlike SNAP benefits (food stamps), which are provided through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card and withdrawn like cash, WIC benefits are in the form of food-specific

paper checks that are handled just like personal checks. (For a list of WIC foods and a discussion of how they are changing, see Section II.)

Shopping with WIC checks takes training and practice for program participants and store owners alike. New participants receive detailed instructions and a colorful WIC shopping guide from local WIC staff at their first appointments, along with their WIC checks tucked into a personalized folder bearing their WIC identification number and signature. The checks do not specify a dollar amount; instead, they list the authorized foods, and WIC participants redeem the checks for the foods indicated. For example, they must choose a specific brand of infant



formula, pick breakfast cereals from a list of low-sugar types in 12-ounce boxes or larger, and find certain cheeses that meet the WIC specifications. Many stores display colorful tags, or “shelf talkers,” under WIC-eligible foods to help participants make their selections more easily.

At the checkout, shoppers separate their WIC foods from other purchases and pay for them by endorsing each WIC check in front of the cashier.¹ The cashier, in turn, must make sure that all WIC food items have been correctly chosen in the right amounts, ensure signature matches, and see that the dates on the checks are current, looking for start and expiration dates. When



each check is transacted (usually run through the cash register), the store’s current price for each WIC food item or combination of items is printed on the check. The shopper signs the check in the cashier’s presence.

But the store’s work doesn’t end there. WIC-authorized vendors must report the serial numbers of all WIC checks they redeem by logging them into the state’s computer system (called VWIX) before depositing them. Most stores have this process automated in their cash registers, but smaller stores may use web-based or even telephone reporting instead. This allows the state to track where each check has been redeemed and for how much, information required by federal law.

Next, the store deposits the WIC checks into its local bank. If the prices printed on a check exceed that store’s Maximum Allowable Department Reimbursement (MADR) rate, the check will not be reimbursed and the store must correct the price and resubmit the check.

While this process may sound cumbersome, it is actually seamless for most stores because it is automated. On an average day, the system processes more than 326,000 WIC checks, and only 1 percent will be rejected.

The WIC Grocery Landscape

Every neighborhood has WIC-authorized grocery stores, whether supermarkets, small corner stores, or specialized “WIC-only” stores (often located very close to local WIC centers). Any grocer can become an authorized WIC grocer as long as it meets and maintains the requirements.

More than 4,000 grocery stores in California are currently authorized to accept WIC checks. The state WIC program classifies WIC-authorized grocers by size: as of this writing, there are 2,111 chain stores (defined as businesses with seven or more stores in a contract); 351 independents (those with two to six stores in a contract); 1,245 neighborhood stores (one WIC-authorized store in a contract); and 573 “above 50 percent” stores.

By federal definition, an “above 50 percent” store is one that derives more than half its annual food sales revenue from items redeemed with WIC

checks. Most “above 50 percent” stores are commonly known as “WIC-only” stores. These specialty grocers, who serve only WIC participants and usually accept only WIC checks, play a fairly substantial role in the WIC market. While they make up only about 16 percent of the total number of authorized stores, WIC-only stores redeem close 40 percent of the total retail value of WIC checks every month. Some WIC-only stores are individually owned; others are operated as part of a chain, in some cases as subsidiaries of full-service grocery businesses.

Photo by Lydia Daniller



Cost Containment

WIC must operate within a yearly federal appropriation, serving as many participants as cost-effectively as possible. If food prices go up, fewer people who are eligible for WIC benefits can receive them, or Congress must increase WIC appropriations to pay for higher food costs. For every five-cent increase in retail food prices, for example, the California WIC program must spend an additional \$64,230 per month, which means 1,170 fewer individuals can be served. Carefully containing food costs is good public policy, sustaining taxpayer and Congressional support for WIC throughout its history.

The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act of 2004 included important vendor cost containment provisions to ensure the WIC program could continue to serve as many participants as possible. The new system requires all states to categorize WIC vendors into peer groups based on store type, number of registers, and geography. States must establish price criteria for each peer group, which will be used when assessing vendors’ applications for WIC authorization to make sure that authorized vendors charge competitive prices. For each peer group, the state sets maximum tolerances for prices paid. Peer group pricing allows states to use market forces, instead of bureaucratic price controls or limitations on vendor approvals, to control retail WIC food costs in an equitable manner.

In addition, federal law now requires California and other states that authorize “above 50 percent” or WIC-only stores (not all states do so) to ensure that these store redemptions are cost-neutral – in other words, that their prices do not cost the WIC program more than redeeming food instruments at regular grocery stores. The 2004 law also requires all states to allow participants to redeem their checks at any authorized vendor.

There are currently 16 vendor peer groups in California WIC. “Above 50 percent” stores are in one peer group, and all other stores are categorized into 15 other groups, based on geography and their number of cash registers. Price tolerances for each food item and peer group, known as Maximum Allowable Department Reimbursement (MADR) rates, are evaluated and published online every two weeks; they may fluctuate depending on market factors. WIC participants can shop at any authorized vendor, identified by a We Accept WIC sign displayed on the storefront.²



The New WIC Food Packages

Effective October 1, 2009, California’s WIC food packages will include a much healthier selection of food choices that better reflects California’s ethnically diverse WIC population. The new federal regulations implement the first comprehensive revisions to the WIC food packages since 1980.

These revised food packages were developed for several reasons: to align the WIC food packages with other national guidelines (the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Dietary Guidelines for Americans and the American Academy of Pediatrics’ infant feeding practice guidelines), to better promote long-term breastfeeding, to provide WIC participants with a wider variety of food, and to give WIC state agencies greater flexibility in prescribing food packages to accommodate cultural food preferences.³

Revised Foods at a Glance:

Current Foods	Revised Foods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Formulas ▶ Milk ▶ Cereal (infant & adult) ▶ Juice ▶ Eggs ▶ Cheese ▶ Dried beans or peanut butter ▶ Tuna ▶ Carrots 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ All current foods ▶ Fruits and vegetables ▶ Whole wheat bread or other whole grains ▶ Soy beverage and tofu ▶ Light tuna, salmon, sardines, mackerel ▶ Canned beans ▶ Infant foods

Current vs. New Food Packages for Pregnant Women

Food	Current Package	New Package
Cow's Milk	5 half-gallons Any fat level	4 half-gallons and 1 quart* Only 2% or less fat milk
Cheese	2 lbs Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, or Process American cheese	1 lb** Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, Colby, or any combination of these cheeses or Mozzarella string cheese
Eggs	2 dozen	1 dozen
Beans/ Peanut Butter	1 lb dried beans or 18 oz peanut butter	1 lb dried beans and 18 oz peanut butter
Juice	Four 64 oz ready-to-drink juice containers or six 12 oz frozen juice containers	Three 11.5–12 oz frozen juice containers or shelf-stable concentrate juice or two 64 oz ready-to-drink juice containers
Fruits and Vegetables	None	Cash Value vouchers for \$8 (fresh, frozen or canned)
Breakfast Cereals	36 oz	36 oz At least half the choices are whole grain cereals
Whole Grains	None	1 lb Options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Whole wheat bread ▶ Soft corn tortillas ▶ Whole wheat tortillas ▶ Oatmeal, brown rice ▶ Bulgur ▶ Barley

* Soy-based beverage and/or tofu may be requested without medical documentation as substitutes for cow's milk.

** The participants who do not want any cheese will receive a different package containing an additional 3 quarts of fluid milk.

Current vs. New Food Packages for Fully Breastfeeding Women

Food	Current Package	New Package
Cow's Milk	5 half-gallons Any fat level	5 gallons and 1 quart* Only 2% or less fat milk
Cheese	3 lbs Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, or Process American cheese	2 lb Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, Colby, or any combination of these cheeses or Mozzarella string cheese
Eggs	2 dozen	2 dozen
Beans or Peanut Butter	1 lb dried beans or 18 oz peanut butter	1 lb dried beans and 18 oz peanut butter
Juice	Five 64 oz ready-to-drink juice containers or seven 12 oz frozen juice containers	Three 11.5–12 oz frozen juice containers or shelf-stable concentrate juice or two 64 oz ready-to-drink juice containers
Fruits and Vegetables	2 lbs pre-packaged carrots	Cash Value vouchers for \$10 (fresh, frozen or canned)
Breakfast Cereals	36 oz	36 oz At least half the choices are whole grain cereals
Whole Grains	None	1 lb Options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Whole wheat bread ▶ Soft corn tortillas ▶ Whole wheat tortillas ▶ Oatmeal, brown rice ▶ Bulgur ▶ Barley
Canned Fish	26 oz tuna	30 oz canned chunk light tuna, salmon or sardines

* Soy-based beverage and/or tofu may be requested without medical documentation as substitutes for cow's milk.

Current vs. New Food Packages for Children 1–5 years

Food	Current Package	New Package
Cow's Milk	4 half-gallons Whole milk is recommended for 1–2 year olds Any fat level for 2–5 years olds	3 gallons and 1 quart* Only whole milk for 1–2 year olds 2% or less fat milk for 2–5 year olds
Cheese	2 lbs Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, or Process American cheese	1 lb** Block of Cheddar, Jack, Mozzarella, Colby, or any combination of these cheeses or Mozzarella string cheese
Eggs	2 dozen	1 dozen
Beans or Peanut Butter	1 lb dried beans or 18 oz peanut butter	1 lb dried beans and 18 oz peanut butter
Juice	Four 64 oz ready-to-drink juice containers or six 12 oz frozen juice containers	Two 64 oz ready-to-drink containers or Two 16 oz frozen concentrate
Fruits and Vegetables	None	Cash Value vouchers for \$6 (fresh, frozen or canned)
Breakfast Cereals	36 oz	36 oz At least half the choices are whole grain cereals
Whole Grains	None	2 lb Options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Whole wheat bread ▶ Soft corn tortillas ▶ Whole wheat tortillas ▶ Oatmeal, brown rice ▶ Bulgur ▶ Barley

* Soy-based beverage and/or tofu may be requested without medical documentation as substitutes for cow's milk.

** The participants who do not want any cheese will receive a different package containing an additional 3 quarts of fluid milk.

Infant Foods

Infants will receive food checks for fruit and vegetable baby food, redeemable for any brand of fruit and vegetable infant food in 3.5 oz. twin-packs or 4 oz. containers in stage 2 foods. Organic is also allowed.

Baby food meats are allowed at six months of age for exclusively breastfed infants only. The food instruments will be redeemable for any brand of infant meats in 2.5 oz. containers. Added broth or gravy is allowed.

Infant Cereal

The new food packages delay the introduction of complementary foods (also known as “solid foods”) to six months of age, thereby delaying the introduction of foods such as cereal previously offered in the food packages.

Gerber dry-pack infant cereal with iron in 8 oz. boxes is the only brand currently allowed at this time because of a manufacturer rebate. Barley, rice, oatmeal, and mixed are the cereal types allowed.

Infant Formula

WIC participants feeding formula to their infant can buy, with WIC food instruments, the contracted infant formula in the following types:

Powder and Liquid Concentrate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Enfamil LIPIL with Iron▶ Enfamil ProSobee LIPIL
Powder Only	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Gentlease LIPIL▶ A.R. LIPIL

Special medical formulas may be allowed only if prescribed by the health care provider. Participants cannot use WIC checks for any brand, type, or size not printed on the food instrument, or for low-iron infant formula or formula with no iron.

To protect WIC consumers, federal law requires that all WIC-authorized grocers buy infant formula only from approved sources. Grocers can either (1) purchase the product directly from the FDA-approved formula manufacturer (the state provides a list on its website),⁴ or (2) purchase it from a licensed wholesaler or retailer. Grocers choosing to obtain formula from the latter must request the seller’s permit number, issued by the California Board of Equalization (BOE). After obtaining the permit number from the supplier, the grocer must verify the validity of the permit by checking the number with the BOE, either by an Internet Verification Service,⁵ by phone, or by mail. This information must then be provided to the state WIC program.

New Minimum Stocking Requirements

WIC-authorized vendors are required to maintain a minimum amount of WIC food on the shelves at all times to ensure that shoppers can find most of the foods listed on their checks. The state WIC program spot-checks stores for compliance, and stores who fail to maintain it can be removed from the program.

Not all the foods included on WIC checks are on the minimum stocking list. For example, all stores must stock \$16 worth of a combination of two varieties of fruits and two varieties of vegetables, but they do not have to stock canned or frozen fruits and vegetables, which are also allowed by WIC.

Advocates should use this list, not the longer WIC Authorized Food List, to check and see if a potential small store is willing and able to stock everything on it in order to be a WIC vendor.

For a list of the minimum inventory requirements (in draft stage as of this writing and subject to change), see the appendix of this toolkit.

Local Vendor Liaisons

To strengthen partnerships between local WIC programs and grocers in the communities they both serve, the California WIC program recently implemented a new local agency function, the **WIC Local Vendor Liaison (LVL)**. The LVL program funds dedicated, trained staff in every local WIC agency to visit all WIC-authorized grocers, promote the new WIC foods, provide shelf talkers and other materials to make WIC foods appealing and easy to find, and offer support and education to store managers and staff on general WIC issues.

These local WIC employees have defined roles, clearly distinct from the monitoring and compliance activities that remain the responsibility of state WIC staff. Community food advocates with technical questions about vendor applications, contracts, food pricing, or check redemption should contact the state vendor unit, not the local WIC LVL.

What WIC Local Vendor Liaisons Will Do

- ▶ Provide stores with materials such as shelf talkers, WIC shopping guides, WIC Accepted Here decals, and information about upcoming vendor trainings
- ▶ Gather information needed to assist with implementing the WIC food package changes, using brief price and food availability surveys
- ▶ Provide information about upcoming WIC program changes
- ▶ Provide feedback to local WIC agency on potential training needs for participants and/or staff, based on information gathered about the shopping experience
- ▶ Share comments and questions from the vendor community with state WIC program and other LVLs

What the State Agency Will Do

- ▶ Monitor vendors for program compliance
- ▶ Handle all issues and questions regarding vendor contract provisions
- ▶ Answer questions regarding policy and program compliance

- ▶ Respond to WIC vendor complaints about other WIC vendors

LVLs are specifically deployed to interact and partner only with stores currently authorized by WIC. In fact, federal conflict-of-interest rules specifically prohibit WIC staff from recruiting or assisting non-WIC grocers who want to become WIC-authorized. This means that LVLs cannot provide training or technical assistance to non-WIC stores, or help them navigate the vendor application process.

If LVLs run across a store owner who wants to apply for WIC authorization, they are trained to provide information about how to contact the vendor unit of the California WIC Division, and where to download all the application materials on the state's website. LVLs also can refer non-WIC-authorized store owners to skilled community advocates, if available, who can not only assist with the WIC application, but also offer training and technical assistance around public and private financial or business services support.

To identify healthy food retail advocates who can provide assistance to currently-authorized WIC vendors and recruit new stores to the WIC program:

- ▶ Visit the website of the California Convergence (www.californiaconvergence.org) to identify whether one of the more than 40 coalition members is working to improve the food retail environment in your community.
- ▶ Check with your local public health department. About one-third of California's health departments participate in the *Network for a Healthy California's* Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention (CX³), with a strong interest in creating communities that support healthy eating. For more information on CX³, see www.ca5aday.com/cx3.
- ▶ Sign up for the Healthy Corner Store Network email list at www.healthycornerstores.org.

1 The California WIC program anticipates that WIC benefits will be administered electronically (EBT) by 2013.

2 For more information about California WIC Vendor Issues, see ww2.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerVendorMainPage.aspx. To keep up with changes in vendor policies, read the WIC Vendor Alerts posted at ww2.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerAlerts.aspx.

3 The proposed food list, pending comments, will be finalized in 2010. Comments about the proposed list can be sent to WICfoods@cdph.ca.gov.

4 See Grocer Alert 2005-08 and 2005-11, available at: www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerAlerts.aspx.

5 Grocers can verify a formula supplier's permit number at <https://efile.boe.ca.gov/boewebservices/verification.jsp?action=SALES>.

SECTION II

Working with Neighborhood Stores

Neighborhood store owners may not be familiar with the WIC program and the opportunity it presents to increase the store's customer base. But many are committed members of the community, concerned about their customers' well-being.

Identifying Prospective WIC Retailers

Becoming – and remaining – a WIC vendor requires an ongoing investment of time and resources, and a willingness to comply with WIC rules. WIC vendors need to work with state and local WIC administrators to ensure that WIC-allowable foods are adequately stocked under sanitary conditions. They must provide a positive shopping and checkout experience, and transact and report all WIC checks properly to receive payment. Each store owner must keep up with WIC changes in foods, prices, and rules, which are communicated to vendors via mailed or emailed Grocer Alerts (also available on the website at ww2.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerVendorMainPage.aspx).

Becoming a WIC-authorized vendor is not advisable for every small corner store. Some store operators may be too marginal or convenience-oriented; others may face stiff competition from existing WIC-authorized vendors, particularly from WIC-only stores. Stores that charge exorbitant prices for groceries may not be, at least from a public policy viewpoint, the best choice for WIC authorization. Small neighborhood stores likely fall into the peer group with the highest reimbursement rate, which means that increased access at the neighborhood level could result in higher costs for the WIC program and therefore fewer participants being served.

Before working with corner stores to seek WIC authorization, advocates should understand WIC vendor rules, study neighborhood grocery dynamics, and find out where WIC participants are already shopping in the area. When working with a potential store, try to determine the store's current business and legal ownership, prior history (if any) as a SNAP (food stamp)-authorized vendor, and motivation for WIC authorization.

Many California public health departments, working in collaboration with community partners, have surveyed local food retailers through the Communities of Excellence in Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Prevention (CX³) program (funded by the *Network for a Healthy California*). The CX³ surveys include detailed information on the quality of fruit and vegetables, other healthy food items consistent with the new WIC food package, the types of marketing messages in and around the stores, and the walkability of the surrounding area. Contact your local health department to see if the CX³ data might help you select prospective retailers and identify neighborhoods where the need is greatest.

General Criteria for Vendor with Good WIC Potential

- ▶ Has a positive relationship with the community
- ▶ Already open for business with a valid seller's permit and a clean city or county health permit on display
- ▶ Not previously sanctioned or disqualified from "food stamp" or WIC authorization
- ▶ Willing to certify and maintain minimum stocking requirements of WIC foods, including fresh produce, low-fat dairy, infant foods, and whole grains
- ▶ Willing to stock WIC's current brand of infant formula and certify that it is purchased from licensed and authorized sources
- ▶ Has capacity to read and understand English (or can work with a representative who does), attend required WIC trainings, and handle check transaction and reporting system
- ▶ Serves an area with numerous potential WIC shoppers but is not located near an existing WIC-authorized (especially a WIC-only) store
- ▶ Has a clean criminal and business record
- ▶ Charges fair prices
- ▶ Maintains a safe and family-friendly environment

Recruiting New WIC Vendors



Neighborhood stores may be interested in seeking WIC customers – who shop for other foods and thus increase sales – by upgrading their offerings based on the new packages. They could use technical assistance from advocates as they navigate the WIC vendor application process, improve their stock, and hopefully expand their business. This section explains the process store owners must follow to become authorized WIC vendors and offers guidelines for identifying potential WIC vendors.

For information about working with *farmers' markets* to accept WIC vouchers, see the appendix in this toolkit.

WIC Vendor Application

All new WIC grocer/vendor applications are authorized by the WIC Supplemental Nutrition Division of the California Department of Public Health (CDPH).¹ Because of conflict-of-interest policies, however, neither the state nor the local WIC program conducts outreach to enroll new vendors, and CDPH may limit the number of vendors in a geographic area, taking into consideration "the adequacy of participant access and the Department's ability to effectively manage review of authorized food vendors."²

The process to become a WIC-authorized vendor essentially involves three steps:

1. Submitting a complete application package
2. Attending the required vendor training class offered by the state WIC Program
3. Complying with an on-site inspection

After approval, the vendor must continue to stay in compliance or risk sanctions or termination. State WIC staff do not provide technical assistance or advice on how to establish a store or how to operate a WIC-only business. Additional resources available to business owners in your community are described later in this section.

STEP ONE: Application Package

All prospective WIC vendors must submit a complete application package to the state WIC program. Although the application materials are fairly straightforward, advocates can help prospective vendors navigate the application process. See the appendix of this toolkit for a handout, targeted at retailers, summarizing the WIC vendor application process.

To download the full set of application documents: www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerNewVendorPackage.aspx

The application package is considered complete when the WIC program has reviewed and determined that all required application materials have been correctly submitted. It is important to note that a completed application package does not mean that all authorization criteria have been met. Vendors are screened to ensure business integrity, legality, and other appropriate criteria during this stage. The application approval process can take up to 90 days (or longer, if there are indications that a vendor may not be able to comply with WIC requirements).

Currently, all vendor application materials, training, and instruction from the California WIC program are available in English only. Although the state WIC program requires that business owners (or their representative) speak and read English, vendors may feel more comfortable if the initial outreach is conducted in their primary language. Advocates working with store owners with limited English proficiency may consider developing a brief fact sheet on WIC in other languages.

STEP TWO: Vendor Training

After the WIC program has received and approved an application package, the grocer will be required to attend a vendor training class. Applicants receive a letter informing them of the date, time, and location of the class, and they are required to take a simple test at the end of the session. Their application for authorization may be denied if they fail to attend and pass the vendor education class.

Food stamps, now known as SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), provide another important form of nutrition assistance for low-income families. If you are working with a store that is not enrolled as a SNAP vendor, please share the “Becoming a Food Stamp Retailer” flyer available in the back of this toolkit.

STEP THREE: On-Site Inspection

Once the training requirement is met, a WIC program representative will inspect the store to ensure that it meets all requirements. (For more details, see www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICGrocerNewVendorPackage.aspx and click on “Preparing for an On-Site Inspection.”) The WIC representative will note prices as well as the ratio of WIC-authorized food items to other foods in the applicant store, to help the program determine whether the store is likely to derive more than 50 percent of its food sales from WIC food instruments.

Challenges

For advocates seeking to enroll new stores in the program, as well as for the “mom and pop” stores already participating (which currently represent about a third of WIC-authorized vendors), the new WIC food packages may present challenges. Many of these neighborhood stores do not currently stock produce and may need basic business assistance to upgrade their offerings.

This section explores some types of support neighborhood grocers may need to transition to the WIC program or its new food packages successfully.

1. Investing in store infrastructure

At many small neighborhood stores, shelf space for healthy choices is at a premium, and there may not be adequate refrigeration for produce. Some stores will need to invest in storage and display units, scales, and other improvements (such as electrical upgrades to accommodate new refrigeration units) before they can carry an adequate selection of produce. In addition to changes inside the store, store owners may wish to upgrade store exteriors to signal the changes in their business model to the community. Store owners may be unwilling to make major investments in store infrastructure without the guarantee that the new items will be profitable.

2. Developing new expertise

Small store owners may not have the technical knowledge needed to stock and maintain perishable items. Produce must be stored at a certain temperature, for example, and produce that emits ethylene (a natural gas that causes some vegetables to ripen faster) must be stocked away from ethylene-sensitive varieties. Store owners may also benefit from training on how to stack, rotate, ice, and mist produce items to maintain quality. Without this kind of technical knowledge, the quality of the produce will quickly deteriorate.

3. Accessing new distribution networks

Most small stores have contracts with snack food and soda distributors, who offer store owners many perks: they provide free delivery, stock the shelves directly, guarantee a buy-back of any unsold items, and supply incentives such as advertising materials and refrigeration units. In exchange for these benefits, the companies may require their refrigeration and shelving units to be placed near the front of the store and limit what items can be stocked to their products.

By contrast, produce wholesalers may not offer delivery for small stores that do not order a minimum number of cases. Other wholesalers charge a fee for delivery, further increasing the cost of fresh items. To offer produce at a reasonable price, some owners order more than they can sell within its shelf life and end up with spoiled product.

4. Marketing new foods

Most neighborhood food retailers have limited expertise in marketing their business. For those who wish to rebrand themselves as healthy stores, sophisticated marketing and outreach can bring new customers. Store owners may need assistance with product placement and in-store marketing tools (such as shelf-talkers, posters, recipe cards, and taste tests) to guide customers toward the new healthy choices.



Small store owners usually do not have the resources to conduct market studies to determine what products to sell. They may rely on past experience and trial and error to guide their business model. Particularly when a store owner has had an unsuccessful experience stocking healthy foods, he or she may be reluctant to experiment with new product lines without knowing the demand for healthier choices.

Resources for Neighborhood Stores

There are many resources for neighborhood stores with good WIC potential or currently authorized stores struggling to adapt to the food package changes. Advocates for healthy food retail will have to sort through a wide range of programs offered by local and state government, nonprofit advocacy organizations, and others to help strengthen small businesses. This list provides a starting point, along with recommendations for more in-depth resources available elsewhere. The type of funding or support the business owner will want to pursue depends on the scope of the changes in the store.

Some of the grants and services are available directly to community-based organizations, while others are awarded specifically to local businesses.

Energy Efficiency

For most food retailers, energy costs are second only to labor. Small businesses can take advantage of incentives from local governments and utilities to offset the costs of energy-efficient lighting and refrigeration. *Greening Grocery: Strategies for Sustainable Food Retailing* (www.greeninggrocery.org), from The Food Trust, is a valuable resource for store operators and policymakers who want to leverage the potential cost savings of green building practices to incentivize healthy food retail. For a list of California energy efficiency programs, check with your local economic development agency or utility company, or email info@healthyplanning.org.

Resources for Improving Store Infrastructure

Local economic development agencies – which engage in a wide range of activities to help build and sustain local businesses – may be able to help small business owners wishing to invest in capital improvements to their store. Agencies working on economic development understand the challenges faced by small businesses, making them key partners for public health advocates working to improve food access in underserved communities.

The city can help small businesses obtain a low-interest loan, retain its lease, or find a new space. In addition, many city economic development agencies oversee projects to support a city’s commercial districts, which can include beautifying storefronts and streetscapes, improving cleanliness and safety, and attracting and promoting neighborhood businesses.

In addition to the resources available through economic development agencies, most cities and many counties in California have established *redevelopment* agencies to oversee urban revitalization efforts. Though typically staffed by city or county personnel, these are technically independent state agencies. Not only do they have access to financing mechanisms that are otherwise not available to cities and counties, they can leverage additional public and private investment to fully revitalize neighborhoods over time.



Redevelopment agencies can support small food retailers through façade improvement programs, which provide funding to improve signage, windows, exterior lighting, awnings, and sometimes sidewalks and landscaping in front of their businesses. (Some cities provide basic grants; others require matching funds or offer loans.) Redevelopment agencies can also leverage other grant programs (such as Community Development Block Grants) to support other types of improvements, such as refrigeration upgrades, and provide business development assistance.

For a more detailed primer on how the tools of economic development and redevelopment can support healthy food retail, download Planning for Healthy Places’ *Economic Development and Redevelopment* toolkit at www.healthyplanning.org.

Resources for Increasing Technical Knowledge

Perhaps the best possible way for a retailer to learn how handle and store fruits, vegetables, and other highly perishable items is to be mentored by a more experienced retailer. Where possible, advocates of healthy food retail may want to retain the business development services of a consultant with grocery industry expertise.

Where a consultant or mentor from the grocery industry is not available, there are a number of helpful guides with basic information on produce handling for retailers. Some wholesalers and distributors also provide this kind of information to their customers.

Produce Handling Resources

A **Fresh Produce and Floral Council Produce Handling Guide**, from the Network for a Healthy California, gives an overview of how to store and handle various fruits and vegetables (www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/cpns/Documents/CPNS- ProduceHandlingGuideFPFC.pdf).

A **produce storage poster** from the University of California at Davis features recommended short-term produce storage temperatures (<http://postharvest.ucdavis.edu/Pubs/postthermo.shtml>).

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a thorough, technical **guide to the commercial storage of fruits and vegetables** (www.ba.ars.usda.gov/hb66/contents.html); the section on grocery store display storage may be particularly interesting to small store owners.

Distribution Resources

Retailers who are not currently stocking fruits and vegetables should determine whether their current distributors carry produce. If not, they should talk to larger retailers in their community to determine who they work with and why. Retailers may also consult the yellow pages and the chamber of commerce to identify local wholesalers and distributors. The California Department of Agriculture maintains a list of licensed wholesalers at www.cdafa.ca.gov/mkt/meb/licensee_list.html. For retailers interested in organic produce, the California Certified Organic Farmers keeps a list of California organic wholesalers at www.ccof.org/directories.php. Retailers can check with the nearest wholesale market to get a list of their members. Retailers should also keep an eye out for produce delivery trucks and call the company for more information.

Once retailers have identified a prospective wholesaler or distributor, they should evaluate whether the services are a good fit for their business. Questions a retailer might ask prospective wholesalers or distributors include:

- ▶ What are your minimums for sales and/or delivery?
- ▶ What are your credit and returns policies?
- ▶ What kind of support do you provide for merchandising?

If the minimum purchase requirements exceed what the retailer is likely to sell at peak quality, consider whether other small stores or institutional

purchasers in your community might be interested in sharing a delivery. If there is sufficient interest, small retailers might connect with local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmers to see if the small store might become a drop-off point for farm boxes.

Marketing Resources

Small business owners seeking help promoting the new healthy foods in their store can turn to a variety of resources. The Network for a Healthy California's Retail Program, for instance, has a retail specialist available for each of its 11 regions to conduct food demonstrations and store tours, and to provide free merchandising materials to retailers;³ see **www.networkforahealthycalifornia.net/retail** for more information.

Cities across the country have developed certification programs to recognize and promote stores that offer healthy options. In exchange for meeting program standards, stores are typically offered a window decal or poster and a range of incentives (such as technical assistance) and promotion. A certification program can be a great complement to a façade improvement: both tools help the store owner communicate the healthy changes to customers. For a full list of these certification programs and examples of the certification logos, email **info@healthyplanning.org**.

Further Resources

The Healthy Corner Stores Network (HCSN) – convened by the Community Food Security Coalition, The Food Trust, and Public Health Law & Policy – promotes efforts to bring healthier foods into corner stores in low-income and underserved communities. The HCSN brings together community members, local government staff, nonprofits, funders, and others across the country to share best practices, lessons learned, and new approaches to common challenges. HCSN activities include quarterly conference calls, an email list, in-person meetings at national conferences, and mini-grants.

For a comprehensive, regularly updated list of resources for healthy food retail advocates – a handful of which are highlighted below – see **www.healthycornerstores.org**.

Further Resources

The **Good Neighbor Best Practices Guide**, from the San Francisco nonprofit Literacy for Environmental Justice (www.lejyouth.org), lays out the steps for a community to establish a corner store conversion program, including sample agreements, evaluations, applications, compliance plans, signage, promotion activities, and the youth connection.

Strategies that Work (www.hartfordfood.org/pubs/healthy_retailers.pdf), a report from the Hartford Food System, describes the Healthy Food Retailer Initiative, a partnership with corner markets and bodegas that is changing the type of food available on grocery shelves.

Apache Healthy Stores Manual of Procedures (<http://healthystores.org/AHSmop.html>) details the responsibilities of the project interventionists for this one-year program and describes the intervention plan, promoted foods, and communication materials for each phase.

The **Neighborhood Food Watch Shopping List and Store Quality Checklist** (www.chc-inc.org/Reach2010/timeline.cfm), from Community Health Councils, was created to support a campaign to hold local food retailers in Los Angeles accountable to community-established standards of quality.

Creating Healthy Corner Stores in the District of Columbia (www.dchunger.org/pdf/cornerstores08_phaseone_report.pdf) reports the results of a corner store survey conducted by D.C. Hunger Solutions to examine barriers to increasing the stores' inventory of fresh produce and other healthy foods.

1 To ensure the current 4,000 vendors make a successful transition to the new foods and the new checks, the California WIC Program has implemented a moratorium on new WIC vendor applications through December 31, 2009.

2 Cal. Admin. Code tit. 22, § 40735

3 Stores must be located in census tracts where at least 50 percent of the population is at or below 185 of the federal poverty level to qualify for free materials and services.

APPENDIX

Glossary of WIC Terms

Any Authorized Vendor (AAV): WIC rule allowing participants to shop at any store approved to redeem WIC food vouchers.

“Above 50 Percent” Store: A retailer that derives more than half its annual food sales revenue from sales redeemed with WIC checks. In California, most but not all of these stores are “WIC-only” stores.

California Department of Public Health (CDPH): The state agency responsible for administering the California WIC program.

Cash Value Voucher (CVV): A check used to purchase fruits and vegetables through the WIC program

Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT): An electronic system that allows recipients to transfer Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (formerly known as “food stamps”) to pay for products from a retailer.

Federal Fiscal Year (FFY): The federal government’s accounting period.

Food Instrument (FI): A WIC check or voucher.

Local Vendor Liaisons (LVLs): Local WIC program employees who interact with authorized grocers in the surrounding community.

Maximum Allowable Department Reimbursement (MADR): Price tolerances or ranges for each WIC food item and peer group. These rates are evaluated and published online every two weeks, and may fluctuate depending on market factors.

Minimum Stocking Requirements: Base-level set and quantity of foods that all WIC-authorized stores are required to stock on the shelves at all times.

Peer Groups: WIC vendors categorized by their number of cash registers and geographical location. Each peer group is assigned a fluctuating Maximum Allowable Department Reimbursement (MADR) rate.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): Formerly known as “food stamps,” a state program providing benefits to low-income people.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): The federal agency that regulates and administers the WIC program nationwide.

Vendor WIC Information Exchange (VWIX): The computer interface used to track the serial numbers of all WIC checks.

WIC-Authorized Food List (WAFL): A reference tool indicating the foods WIC participants can purchase with their food instruments.

WIC Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program (WIC FMNP): A program separate from WIC (but administered by WIC in California) that provides vouchers redeemable only at Certified Farmers’ Markets during the summer months.

WIC-Only Store: A specialty grocery store that stocks WIC foods exclusively and often only accepts WIC checks.

Using WIC Checks at Farmers' Markets

WIC offers two distinct programs for accepting vouchers at farmers' markets: the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) and the Cash Value Voucher (CVV) option.

The WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)

Congress established the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) in 1992 to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to WIC households, and to expand the awareness and use of farmers' markets.



Though the FMNP targets WIC participants and is administered by the state's WIC program, it is actually regulated and operated as an independent federal program.

California operates this program with a \$2.1 million budget, serving about 147,000 families each year. Participating WIC agencies issue FMNP checks during a few months in the summer. Each participant gets \$20 worth of checks for the season, in \$2 denominations. The checks are only redeemable at participating Certified Farmers' Markets.

For more information on the California WIC FMNP, see www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICFarmersMarketNutritionProgramStartUpPackages.aspx.

The Cash Value Voucher Option

State agencies now have the option to authorize farmers to accept WIC cash value vouchers (or WIC checks) for fruits and vegetables. In California, the use of the new produce checks at farmers' markets will be phased in. Due to the complexity of the check transaction requirements, there are considerable challenges to work out with farmers and market managers, and it will take time and state resources to develop an adequate infrastructure to support statewide operation of this option.

Beginning in 2010, the California WIC Division will begin developing farmer authorization and training processes, and evaluating the cost, efficiency, and use of the program, with the goal of launching the first phase in May.

For more information on the CVV option, contact Andy Barbusca at the California WIC Division (Andy.Barbusca@cdph.ca.gov).

Handouts for Store Owners

Advocates are encouraged to share the three handouts in this section with corner store owners:

Becoming a WIC Vendor

This handout briefly explains the benefits of becoming a WIC-authorized retailer and describes the basic requirements and application process.

Minimum WIC Stocking Inventory Amounts

WIC-authorized retailers are required to keep a minimum amount of certain foods from the WIC food packages on their shelves at all times. This handout specifies the minimum quantities of these foods, and identifies additional WIC-eligible food items and sizes that store owners may want to stock.

Becoming a Food Stamp Retailer

This handout is designed to help WIC-authorized vendors who are not enrolled the “food stamp” program apply for a license to accept these benefits as well.



Becoming a WIC Vendor

What is WIC?

WIC (Women, Infants and Children) provides healthy food to low-income and nutritionally at-risk children and pregnant, postpartum, or breastfeeding women.

Why become a WIC vendor?

Once you are an authorized vendor, WIC recipients will be able to spend their WIC checks at your store. New customers may shop at your store, and current customers will be able to buy more products from you. Your sales will grow.

What will I have to do?

You must keep products from every WIC food group on the shelves, at reasonable prices. Cashiers must make sure that customers use their WIC checks for the right items, and you must enter the serial numbers on the checks into the state computer system before putting them into the bank.

How do I apply?

1. Submit the “WIC Single Vendor Store Application,” found online at www.cdph.ca.gov/PROGRAMS/WICWORKS/Pages/WICGrocerNewVendorPackage.aspx. Read the instructions first; they will guide you through the forms. If you want to have more than one store authorized for the program, you must submit the “Multiple Vendor Store Application” instead.
2. Once you have submitted a complete application, your local WIC office will contact you with the date, time, and location of a vendor training class. You must attend the class and pass a simple test at the end.
3. Your local WIC office will contact you to set up an on-site store inspection. To pass, you must have:
 - ▷ A valid health permit or health inspection report showing that the store passed.



Photo by Lydia Daniller

NOTE: WIC will not accept new vendor applications between March 12 and December 31, 2009.

- ▷ Prices for WIC-authorized foods posted on the individual items or on the shelf where the items are located. The prices must be reasonable and comparable to the prices of other stores of similar size and type in the same area.
- ▷ Every type of food group authorized by WIC on the shelves. (Vendors are not required to stock every authorized food item.) For details, see www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Documents/WIC-Grocer-NewVendorPkg-PreparingForAnOnsiteInspection.pdf.

The approval process can take up to 90 days for approval. It will take more time if there are missing items or other problems with the application.

Minimum WIC Stocking Inventory Amounts

WIC-authorized retailers are required to keep the following quantities on their shelves at all times.

Minimum WIC Stocking Inventory	
Food	Quantity
Cow's milk	Three gallons and one half-gallon of whole milk AND Eight gallons and two half-gallons and one quart of 2% or 1% or nonfat milk
Cheese	Three 1 lb packages of authorized types of cheese in any combination
Eggs	Three dozen
Juice	Two 64 oz shelf-stable single strength (any authorized flavor) OR Two 16 oz frozen concentrate (any authorized flavor) AND Three 11.5 oz or 12 oz frozen concentrate (any authorized flavor) OR Three 11.5 oz shelf-stable concentrate (any authorized flavor)
Dry beans/peas/lentils	3 lbs of any combination of dry beans, peas, or lentils in 1 lb packages or 3 lbs in bulk
Peanut butter	Two 16- to 18-oz jars
Canned fish	Six 5 oz cans of tuna OR Five 6 oz cans of tuna
Breakfast cereal	At least two boxes each of any four authorized cereals, one of which must be a whole grain cereal
Whole grain products	Three 1 lb packages of "100% whole wheat" bread in the form of loaves, rolls, or buns OR Three 1 lb packages of soft corn tortillas OR Three 1 lb packages of oatmeal or 3 pounds in bulk OR Three 1 lb packages of brown rice or 3 pounds in bulk
Fresh fruits and vegetables	\$16 worth combination of two varieties of fruits and two varieties of vegetables
Infant fruits and vegetables (baby food)	Sixty-four 4 oz jars OR Thirty-seven 7 oz twin packs
Infant meats	Thirty-one 2.5 oz jars
Infant cereals	Three 8 oz boxes of any combination of authorized infant cereals
Infant formula	Ten 12.9 oz cans of Enfamil LIPIIL with Iron powder OR Thirty-four 13 oz cans of Enfamil LIPIIL with Iron liquid concentrate AND Ten 12.9 oz cans of Enfamil ProSobee LIPIIL powder OR Thirty-four 13 oz cans of Enfamil ProSobee LIPIIL liquid concentrate

WIC-Allowed Foods (Not Required to Stock)

- ▶ Quart of whole milk
- ▶ Quart and half-gallon of whole, 2%, 1%, or nonfat lactose free milk
- ▶ Quart and half-gallon of acidophilus milk
- ▶ Powdered dry milk (9.6oz and 25.6oz)
- ▶ Evaporated milk (12 oz)
- ▶ Tofu (12–16 oz)
- ▶ Soy-based beverage (Pacific Natural Foods Ultra Soy Plain in quart size)
- ▶ Canned beans, peas, and lentils (15–16oz cans)
- ▶ Canned pink salmon (6oz and 14.75 oz cans)
- ▶ Canned sardines (15 oz cans)
- ▶ Whole wheat tortillas (1lb package)
- ▶ Barley (1 lb bags or in bulk)
- ▶ Bulgur (1 lb bags or in bulk)
- ▶ Canned fruits and vegetables (any size that costs \$4 or less)
- ▶ Frozen fruits and vegetables (any size that costs \$4 or less)
- ▶ Enfamil Gentlease LIPIL (12 oz powder)
- ▶ Enfamil AR LIPIL (12.9 oz powder)

Becoming a Food Stamp Retailer

WIC-authorized vendors who are also interested in accepting food stamp benefits can call (877) 823-4369 or download more information and/or the online application at www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/register.htm.

What is the food stamp program?

The food stamp program (now called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) helps put food on the table for about 18 million people in the United States – more than 2 million in California each month.

Today, food stamp benefits are only issued through the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, a kind of debit card through which beneficiaries transfer food stamp payment to retailers.

What will I have to do?

Any retailer who would like to accept food stamp benefits must be licensed to participate. To be eligible, a store must sell food for home preparation and consumption and meet at least one of these two criteria:

(A) Offer for sale at least three different varieties of food in each of the following four staple food groups (with perishable foods in at least two categories) on a daily basis:

- ▶ Bread and grains
- ▶ Dairy
- ▶ Fruits and vegetables
- ▶ Meat, poultry, fish

OR

(B) At least 50 percent of your store's total sales (e.g., food, non-food, services) must be from the sale of eligible staple food.

How do I apply?

1. Call (877) 823-4369 or download more information at www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailers/register.htm

OR

2. Contact staff at your local Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) field office. They are available to answer questions and advise on program rules and procedures.



Photo by Lydia Damiller

Definitions

Perishables: Foods that are fresh, refrigerated, or frozen. Packaged or canned goods are not considered perishables.

Staple Foods: Basic dietary items (e.g., bread, flour, fruits, vegetables, beef, chicken, and fish). Snack or accessory foods (e.g., chips, soda, coffee, condiments, and spices) are not staple foods. Ready-to-eat, prepared foods are also not considered staple foods.

Variety: Different types of food. For example, your store has a variety of dairy items if you sell milk, yogurt, and cheese on a daily basis. It would not have a variety of dairy items if you only sold three versions of milk (e.g., skim milk, evaporated milk, and whole milk).

FNS Field Office Contacts (California)

Los Angeles Field Office (402) Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
360 East 2nd Street, Suite 705
Los Angeles, CA 90012
(213) 894-7834
(213) 894-7838 fax

Satellite Office Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
Sandra Day O'Connor U.S. Courthouse, Ste. 426
401 West Washington Street, SPC 65
Phoenix, AZ 85003-2159
(602) 379-4941
(602) 379-6019 fax

Counties served:
Imperial, Kern, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Ventura

Sacramento Field Office (409) Food and Nutrition Service, USDA
801 "I" Street, Room 416
Sacramento, CA 95814
(916) 498-5790
(916) 498-6487 fax

Counties served:
Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Inyo, Kings, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Mendocino, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Monterey, Napa, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, San Benito, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, Yolo, Yuba



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www.calwic.org