



Using WIC Checks at Farmers' Markets: Current and Future Programs

There is growing interest among farm and community food advocates in finding ways to increase participation among WIC families in local farmer's markets. There is also growing confusion about how WIC interfaces with farmers' markets, because there are actually *two* WIC-related programs involved. One program, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program, has been operating for years in selected sites across the state. The other, the Cash Value Voucher for fruits and vegetables, has not yet been implemented, and will not initially involve all of California's farmers' markets.

The WIC Farmer's Market Nutrition Program (FMNP)

Congress established the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) in 1992 to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to WIC households, expand the awareness and use of farmers' markets, and increase sales at such markets. This small, seasonal program — regulated and operated as a separate and independent federal program — provides checks to WIC families for use only at farmers' markets. Nationally, 20 state WIC agencies and 11 Indian tribal organizations participate in the FMNP.

California WIC operates this program with a \$2.1 million budget and 72 cooperating local agencies and Certified Farmers' Markets, serving about 147,000 WIC families each year. California's participating WIC agencies issue FMNP checks during summer months. Each participant gets \$20 worth of checks, in \$2 denominations, redeemable only at participating Certified Farmer's Markets.

For more information on the California WIC FMNP, go to:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICFarmersMarketNutritionProgramStartUpPackages.aspx>.

The New Cash Value Vouchers at Farmers' Markets

Beginning in 2010, California WIC will be piloting a program linked to the new WIC food package that will allow WIC participants to use WIC cash value vouchers for fruit and vegetables (or WIC checks) at farmers markets.

On October 1, 2009, in response to an historic federal regulatory overhaul, California's WIC food packages will be updated to include a much healthier selection of food choices, with freshness and variety finally available to California's ethnically diverse WIC population. Based on the federal Interim Final Rule and on extensive input from a variety of WIC stakeholders, California WIC released its proposed list of foods, called the WIC Authorized Food List (or WAFL) on February 13, 2009. Comments or suggestions about

the new food list can be sent by email using WICFoods@cdph.ca.gov. For full details, go to <http://ww2.cdph.ca.gov/programs/wicworks/Pages/WICNewFoodPackages.aspx>.

The new packages will include monthly fruit and vegetable cash value vouchers of \$8 for women, \$6 for children, and \$10 for exclusively breastfeeding women. WIC participants will be able to purchase any variety and brand of fresh, whole, or cut fruits and vegetables (except white potatoes) including pre-bagged fresh and organic. Frozen or canned fruits or vegetable without added sugars, fats, or oils and organic are also allowed.

The Interim Rule [at 7 CFR 246.12(v)] allows state agencies the option to authorize farmers to accept WIC cash value vouchers (or WIC checks) for fruits and vegetables. During 2010, due to the complexity of the check transaction required by the Rule, the WIC Division plans to carry out a Cash Value Voucher (CVV) Demonstration Project. This will allow local pilots to test the feasibility and work out some of the technical challenges in using the vouchers to shop for produce at farmers' markets. The Demonstration Project will include three partner groups consisting of a WIC local agency and a nearby farmers' market in diverse locations across the state. Intensive farmer training will begin in February 2010, with pilot sites implementing the testing in May. Project objectives will include the following:

- Develop farmer training on banking processes, such as submitting check serial numbers for payment authorization; reviewing check handling requirements, which will be similar to those used by grocers; and preventing farmers from experiencing return-check charges.
- Develop a farmer authorization process and a process to allow farmers access to WIC's automated systems so they can report check serial numbers.
- Evaluate the cost, efficiency, and participant utilization, and make final decision about statewide cash value voucher redemption at Farmers' Markets.

Previous WIC experience shows that successful pilots involve partner groups in a defined service area that can manage the farmer-training and check-handling process without a great deal of assistance. A Request for Applications (RFA) for parties interested in participating in the Cash Value Voucher Demonstration Project will go out in May 2009. For more information, contact Andy Barbusca at the CDPH WIC Division, at Andy.Barbusca@cdph.ca.gov.

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