

Testimony of Ms. Jessica Burris

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Food for Thought: Examining Federal Nutrition Programs for Young Children and Infants

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Chair Bonamici, Ranking Member Fulcher, Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and Members of the House Education and Labor Committee, thank you for holding today's hearing and providing me with the opportunity to share my experience with WIC services. My name is Jessica Burris. I am a mother of three in North Carolina, and I am so grateful that each of my children was able to get a healthy start thanks to WIC.

As a parent, I had a million questions that didn't always have easy answers, especially about how I should change my diet while pregnant and what to feed my toddlers to make sure they grow up healthy and strong. WIC was there for me with the answers. I have relied on the monthly benefit to purchase nutritious foods that were otherwise too costly for our grocery budget, including fresh produce and eggs. But WIC is so much more than a food benefit – the nutrition and breastfeeding services nurture a community that helps new parents like me build healthier lives for ourselves and our children.

WIC is support.

I was first pregnant when I was fourteen. I was scared, confused, and had a lot of choices to make quickly. Even with my mother and a strong community behind me, I was immensely grateful that there was a program like WIC to support me and my growing family during this time. WIC staff ensured that I could afford food for my daughter, while also helped me build my own knowledge to successfully breastfeed, make smart choices while shopping, and cook healthy foods. Today, my oldest daughter is living and working in Charlotte, and I couldn't be prouder of how she grew up.

As I was raising her, I met my husband, found work, and settled in Troy, North Carolina. When we were ready, my husband and I had two children – a boy and a girl. While we were more established then, and, even though my daughter was on Medicaid, I didn't even imagine that we would be eligible for WIC. A few months after my daughter was born, a healthcare worker pointed out that we could apply for WIC and referred us to a clinic. My younger children never would have received WIC's support if there hadn't been the connection between WIC and Medicaid.

We have to make it as easy as possible for families to know they are eligible and connect them with WIC services. Allowing for remote certifications after the pandemic is an important first step. I wanted my children to continue with WIC, but the program's in-person requirements were a barrier. I live in a small town and our county doesn't even have a birthing hospital. When my son and younger daughter were first certified in 2018, I had to drive them 25 miles away to reach the WIC clinic. The time and distance carried a cost, as my husband and I had to balance the WIC appointment with work responsibilities and child care arrangements. These challenges became worse during the pandemic, as I am one of the millions of American women whose work was disrupted, and I spent six months without employment.

I am thankful that WIC waived these in-person requirements starting in March 2020. I was able to recertify my children for WIC services on a phone call, without hassle and without exposing myself or my children to COVID-19. I also was able to receive nutrition education through online platforms, text messages, and phone appointments. The ongoing support made all the difference for our family.

WIC helps us afford healthier food.

Because of the age difference between my children, I've been able to see how WIC has adapted over the years. With my oldest daughter, I was just starting to learn how to prepare foods for her and

how to shop for nutritious choices. Even in the 1990s, WIC encouraged healthier options and steered me away from purchasing sugary cereals for my daughter. When my younger children reconnected with WIC, I was excited to see all the changes that moved WIC foods closer to the advice of doctors and scientists, including the addition of fruits and vegetables. These changes helped put into reach foods that were ordinarily too expensive for our grocery budget.

I was overjoyed when North Carolina WIC announced the higher value for fruits and vegetables in June 2021. The benefit is ordinarily only \$9 per month for my children, which is nowhere near enough to ensure my kids had consistent access to fruits and vegetables. With the added value up to \$35 per month, I'm able to make fresh, nutritious meals for my children and introduce them to new varieties of healthy foods that they hadn't tried before.

WIC partners effectively with our doctor.

WIC is not just a food benefit. WIC recognizes that good nutrition is a part of overall health and, through education and health screenings at clinic sites, has provided my family with individualized counseling. In 2018, my local WIC clinic offered lead screenings and identified that my three-year-old son had high levels of lead. Since my pediatrician does not screen for lead, we would never have known and sought treatment without the public health services provided through WIC.

After the pandemic, it's important to rethink WIC's relationship with Medicaid and doctor's offices and encourage greater collaboration. WIC has a highly effective Breastfeeding Peer Counselor program, and I was fortunate enough to be hired as a peer counselor in the middle of the pandemic. Local WIC clinics in North Carolina partner with the birthing hospital in Stanly County to provide breastfeeding support at the bedside, a critical time for breastfeeding initiation. These local partnerships bring WIC outside of the clinic walls and connect WIC into the broader healthcare system, which reflects the reality of how families like mine receive care.

I've participated in WIC twice at very different parts of my life, but WIC has consistently delivered support, healthier foods, and important public health services that have significantly impacted the nutrition and wellbeing of my children. I thank you for considering improvements that will build on the important work of this essential program.