

Military OneSource Podcast — Getting to the Core of WIC

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit MilitaryOneSource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. Today we're going to talk about WIC. That's what most people call it and that's fine. That's what we'll be calling it. It's full name. It's actually the Department of Agriculture's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, which is where it gets WIC.

So we have two guests today to talk about this program. We have with us Courtney Paolicelli, and we have Dakota Davis. Courtney is a colleague here at Military Community and Family Policy, the DOD agency that brings you Military OneSource. And Dakota Davis is with the Uniform Services University. Welcome to the both of you.

Courtney Paolicelli:

Thanks for having us, Bruce.

Dakota Davis:

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Bruce Moody:

Well, we're glad to have you here as well. Courtney, let's start with you. Again, we're talking about WIC. Let's just be really basic here. What is WIC and who does it serve?

Courtney Paolicelli:

Thanks so much, Bruce. And thanks again for having us today. So, just starting off, Bruce, as you mentioned earlier, so WIC is an acronym. It actually stands for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children. As you alluded to earlier, that's where it gets WIC, the women, infants and children part of it.

But WIC really is, at least in my mind as a registered dietician, WIC is really the quintessential public health nutrition assistance program in the United States. It provides benefits to nearly six and a half million participants across the country.

And when we talk about its role as a nutrition program and providing nutrition benefits, what we're talking about are really four things. So the first benefit that WIC provides is a monthly supplemental nutrition package. And that's basically like a set of foods that are

specifically targeting the nutritional needs of women who are either pregnant or breastfeeding that might be postpartum, for infants ages birth through 1 year old or toddlers up to age 5.

And so that monthly supplemental nutrition package is really the big benefit that most folks know when they think about WIC. But the other benefits provided by WIC are things like nutrition education, breastfeeding support and as well as referrals to other services or programs like health or social service programs.

So when we think about WIC as a program, the benefits that they confer are these nutritious foods, the nutrition ed, the breastfeeding support, as well as the referrals to these other services. And as I mentioned before, as a program, WIC targets women, infants and children as alluded to, again, in the title itself.

So to be eligible for WIC, you have to fit one of those categories. So you either have to be a pregnant woman or a woman who is up to one year postpartum. Infants ages 0 to 1 year are eligible for WIC, and young children from ages 1 to 5 are eligible for WIC.

And then in addition to just meeting what we call those categories of eligibility, households also have to meet a certain income threshold. So their gross household income typically has to be about less than 185% of the federal poverty level.

And then when you apply for WIC, you have to meet residential requirements. So WIC is typically administered at the state level. So you have to show that you reside in the state in which you're applying for WIC. And then you also must be at what we call nutritional risk.

And I will tell you right now that nutrition risk, it really spans the gamut. Most folks who walk into a WIC clinic are at nutritional risk just by default of being from a lower-income household. So that kind of gives you an overview of the WIC program.

Bruce Moody:

But you mentioned that WIC is a nutrition assistance program. So what kind of foods are we talking about?

Courtney Paolicelli:

Sure. So the foods that are provided through the WIC food package, again, are really geared towards meeting the unique nutritional needs of either women who are pregnant, women who are postpartum or are perhaps breastfeeding.

The WIC food package also helps meet those unique nutrition needs of children who are in infancy, so ages 0 to 1 year or ages 1 to 5. And so the monthly food packages are full of nutrient-dense foods that contain specific macronutrients and micronutrients that are really needed to help promote growth and development.

Unfortunately, those are also a lot of nutrients that are provided through the WIC. Food packages are also typically lacking in the American diet, which is why WIC provides that nutritional support for these individuals.

So just to give you a hard example of what types of foods are in the nutrition packages for WIC participants. So for the children ages 1 to 5 and for women who are pregnant or both postpartum, you can get things like peanut butter; legumes, so like dried beans; fish like canned fish, canned tuna come in the WIC food package; juice; milk, cereal, particularly whole grain cereal or whole grain-rich cereal; eggs, all of those things are part of the WIC food package.

And then the other big thing that is part of the WIC food package is what we call the cash value benefit. And that's basically a set amount of money that folks can use to purchase fruits and vegetables. So for example, for children ages 1 to 5, they get what's called a CVB or cash value benefit of \$26 per month to purchase fruits and vegetables.

And for women who are pregnant or postpartum, depending on which category they fall onto, they can get anywhere from about \$47 to \$52 worth of fruits and vegetables per month. So that's what's in those food packages.

And then WIC also has a slightly different food package of course, for infants ages birth to 11 month because obviously those very young children have different nutritional needs.

So, for those WIC food packages you get things like infant formula if the child is formula-fed or fed through a combination of breast milk and formula. The WIC food package for infants also includes things like iron-fortified infant cereals, and then baby food, fruits and vegetables as well as those baby food meats.

Bruce Moody:

Now, WIC was established as a federal program in 1974, which makes this the 50th anniversary of the program. So now that we have a half century of data backing the need for the program, what are some of the outcomes that we've seen as a result of WIC?

Courtney Paolicelli:

That is a great question, and you're right. This is the 50th anniversary of WIC, which is very exciting. Again, as I mentioned earlier, I see WIC as being that quintessential public health nutrition program.

And part of the reason that I view it that way is because we have so much great data showing the impact of WIC. Over the years, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health and Human Services and scholars and academia, all sorts of groups have conducted studies examining the effectiveness of WIC, and the results have really proven just how valuable the program is.

So just to give you some examples of some of the outcomes that we've seen and we know that WIC, in general, it improves infant health outcomes, it reduces fetal deaths and infant mortality. It reduces low birth weight rates and increases the duration of pregnancy, improves the growth of nutritionally at-risk infants and children.

From a nutrition standpoint, one of the reasons WIC started as a program was because we recognized the public health significance of iron deficiency and we've seen decreases in the incidence of iron deficiency anemia in children, and we attribute a lot of that to WIC as a program.

And then again, WIC is, it's again, it's a nutrition program, so it's been shown to improve the dietary intake of pregnant and postpartum women, help with keeping weight gains in the right range for women who are pregnant. And then for children, WIC really helps to improve children's diet and we have a lot of literature showing that the longer children participate in WIC, the better their overall diet quality is.

And then WIC also helps kids get ready to start school. Those who receive WIC benefits demonstrate improvements in things like intellectual development. So there is a whole body of scientific literature showing the impacts of WIC. And as I mentioned, everything is really just pointed to the fact that it really is an important and impactful public health nutrition program.

Bruce Moody:

Thanks, Courtney. Dakota, I want to bring you into the conversation now. You're a community health advocate. You promote WIC as a nutrition and a health education resource. You've also benefited personally from WIC. Maybe we can start there.

I'd like you to share your story. You, you've used WIC. What were some of the challenges and what were some of the benefits of using this program?

Dakota Davis:

Absolutely. So just for some background, I'm also a military spouse. So I've been with my husband since he officially enrolled into the military. So we went through basic AIT, all the wonderful trainings together.

And so we got married very young. We were 18 and then had our daughter at 19. So we were this young couple who moved away from our support system to a new state. We were stationed at Fort Bragg, now known as Fort Liberty. And so there were some challenges that come with being a military family, and one of those is there's no child care available for us. There's long waitlist.

By the time you get onto the waitlist, it's been a year, two years down the road. And so that was an issue we ran into. So I couldn't work for quite a while. I stayed home with our daughter, so we were one one-income family. During that time, one-income family trying to feed three people and pay your bills. There were times we sat down and we're like, how are we going to pay this bill but also buy healthy groceries?

So we would go back and forth and we went online and were trying to find resources for us, and that's how we found WIC. No one had ever told us about it. No one had introduced us to this program. We just happened to stumble upon it online, applied for it and went through the enrollment process. We really had to advocate for ourselves to get into this program.

Benefits wise, like I said, it took a lot of pressure off of buying groceries. I remember sitting down with my husband and being like, “we're going to have to skip a bill to be able to buy groceries and gas for you to go to work” at one point in our life. But WIC stepped in and now we could buy milk, eggs, cheese, fruits and vegetables, and it took some pressure off of us.

Another support was the breastfeeding aspect. I was a first-time mom away from my support system and my mom also didn't breastfeed, so I really didn't have someone to go to for tips and tricks and when things went wrong, who to contact and have help.

They had a breastfeeding peer counselor, a lactation consultant on staff who actually helped me through their process, and I 100% credit them to the fact that I was able to breastfeed for a year and because without their assistance, I probably would've given up very early on because I was having some issues with it.

I won't say that it's a perfect program. I had some challenges. Military pay is very nuanced. It's very hard to understand sometimes. The way that they read your income for a military family is through something called a leave and earning statement, which is an LES. And that can be confusing for people, especially if they're not familiar with it and see it every day.

So when I went in for my appointment, the first employee told me, "You don't qualify for WIC, you make too much money." But then a few minutes later, I had another employee come in and say, "No, we read it wrong. You actually do qualify for the program, so we're going to get you enrolled." So that can be a challenge for families of, I was told I didn't qualify. Do I try again? What's really going on here?

Also, when I was on the program, we had paper vouchers, so it was a little different than what they have now. Now, most states had moved on to an electronic benefits card. But I had paper vouchers and it would say, you need to get three gallons of milk and this much cheese and you had to get all those benefits at one time or you lost the rest of those benefits for the rest of the month.

So I would go home with four or five gallons of milk and not know what to do with them. Now they have the benefits card and they can get one gallon of milk now, get it next week, get another gallon or however they want to split their benefits up.

Bruce Moody:

Dakota, I'm so glad that you are sharing your story because there are so many young military families, people who have made the decision to serve. And when you're young, the finances can be tough to juggle and that is why WIC exists.

And I think it's just fantastic that you with your story, are now serving as a community health worker. So I guess I'd like to know what are you doing now with your story and your current position to support members of the military community and getting them connected to WIC?

Dakota Davis:

So the big thing we're doing is I'd like to sum it up as we're educating and we're advocating, so I want to educate families on that this benefit's here, and then advocate for them so that they can get into the program and actually utilize those programs.

So like we said, WIC has been around for 50 years now, but it's still underutilized. There's still quite a few people who don't know about the program, just aren't enrolled in it. They're scared to use the program just because there sometimes are... You know people have a bad image of using benefits and stuff like that that you've earned and these are here and you should be allowed to use them. But there can be a stigma around it.

I know early on when we started this project, we were told everyone knows about WIC. Why are you doing this? It's been around, we all know about it, but I'm meeting families daily who've either not heard about it, they know the name, but they're not sure what it is or they're like, "I don't know if I would qualify, my husband's active duty. Do we really qualify for benefits programs being an active duty service member and family?"

So we just are really trying to educate on that and get more families involved. Ideally, we would like to see everyone who qualifies be in this program. But some things that we're doing to do that is we created a list through DEERS, which is a system that the military uses to store information, like the service member's rank, their years in service, their number of dependents and contact information.

We have access to this information through a data share agreement with DHA. And so we did targeted outreach through mailers and phone calls to these families we identified that would likely be eligible. So through that, we'd send the mailers out. Two weeks later, I would start with phone calls and we'd call every single one on our list and say, "Hey, we think you're eligible would you like to be screened and see if you actually are and then we can get you in this program?"

So far with that, we've reached and referred over 300 families to local WIC offices for enrollment, which I think that's a huge accomplishment. That's 300 families who would not have enrolled prior, so that's a huge impact for our area. We do this through a screening tool. It was actually created by Dr. Spin at Walter Reed.

It's just a interactive Excel file that has military pay scale uploaded. It has the WIC income allowance uploaded, and I input their information such as their number of dependents, years in service and their rank, and it spits out an answer if they're eligible or not. I can go through the screening process in five minutes with a family. They don't have to bring me documents, they don't have to bring anything.

It's truly a very quick process to see if they're eligible. Once we find out that they're eligible, I switch into an advocate role with them. We talk about what documents to bring, where to go. If you're not familiar with Fort Campbell, it actually sits on two states. So I'm dealing with Kentucky and Tennessee.

The unique thing is if you live on Fort Campbell, you may have a Kentucky address, but be a Tennessee resident, meaning you have to get Tennessee benefits, which can be

very confusing for families. We go over what to expect and then if any problems arise, I step in with the family even if I need to go to the clinic with them, getting them translators because we do have a lot of families who may speak Spanish or French and they need someone to translate for them. Reaching out to the clinics and figuring out what went wrong in this process and how can we fix it.

On top of that, I have an office in the Women's health clinic, and so I'm screening intake pregnancy, so whether it be a new pregnancy or a family who recently moved to the area who are now starting their prenatal care with us, I try to screen every family coming in if they're wanting to be screened. And then we're seeing a lot of first-time parents with no knowledge of WIC services. They're like, "I've never even heard of that."

And so this is a good way to connect them and get them into it. I go to briefings every Thursday. We have a briefing called our Newcomers Briefing, and so this is where every incoming soldier to Fort Campbell comes, and then so they get briefed on different resources we have like ACS, which is the Army Community Services. We talk about WIC during this. They talk about Military OneSource.

So there's a ton of information being given every Thursday morning and I'm seeing up to 200 service members a week and their family members, everybody in that meeting's not part of my targeted group because they may not have families, they may not have young children, but especially those that are going to leadership positions, they really need to know about these programs because when you have a family come to you that may need it, now you know about it. So at least we're getting it out there to them.

Bruce Moody:

Dakota, I'm so happy to be having this conversation with you because you absolutely are nailing it. You may think you know WIC, but you don't really know. You probably don't know exactly how it works, but the truth is, there are so many people who need WIC and they don't even know it's an option available to them.

And this is what I would like to say to people who are listening to this podcast. If you're listening to this podcast and you are a leader of any level, if you lead two people or you lead significant numbers of people, I want you to share this podcast.

I'm not trying to promote me or this podcast, but this is really important information. Share the link, pull a link out of this podcast, I don't care. But make sure as somebody who looks after other people, you are taking information about this program and getting it circulating around because it will land where somebody needs it. And that brings me to my next question, which is who is eligible for WIC?

Dakota Davis:

Yes. Similar to what was talked about before, it's going to be women who are pregnant. For most states, that's from the time the pregnancy is confirmed. So for Kentucky and Tennessee, you have to have it medically confirmed. So you'd go to your doctor, they'd give you a letter and saying you're pregnant, and then you can now enroll into that program.

So we're talking as early as six weeks or so for a pregnant woman and then a woman who is postpartum. She can be enrolled for six months if she is formula feeding or a year if breastfeeding, infants up until the 11th month and then children until they turn 5.

So once they turn 5, they are no longer eligible for the program. But if you can get enrolled from the time you're pregnant all the way to their fifth, that's a lot of benefits, a lot of food coming into your household that could really benefit your child's development.

I know one thing that we hear a lot, and I push it so much is don't let your rank stop you from checking your eligibility. So when I first started this job, I was told if they're in E-6 or higher, it's not happening. You're not getting into the program, which is wrong. This program is based on family size. So I see E-6s, E-7s, officers, warrant officers, I've gotten them all screened and had them sent out.

And that shocks a lot of people because you hear officer and you think, oh, they make a lot of money, they wouldn't be eligible. But that's not true. There's warrant officers that are, and so we're really pushing for, you know it doesn't take long to check if you're eligible, just stop in call a WIC clinic and just check because it doesn't hurt to find out.

Bruce Moody:

Okay, so you mentioned WIC clinics. I honestly don't know what a WIC clinic is. So what's a WIC clinic and where can I find one?

Dakota Davis:

So your WIC clinic is going to be your central point for all your benefits. So that's going to be where your breastfeeding support and peer counselors are, your nutritionists and then just people who can answer questions about the WIC benefits. They're the ones who they give you your card and they make sure your benefits are uploaded every month.

It is a state by state program, so each state's going to have their own location and usually, they're in different counties. So for our area, I send most people to Montgomery County, the closest county to Fort Campbell for Tennessee, or I send them to Christian County for Kentucky because that's just the closest one for us.

So the easiest way for someone to find that is to go to signupwic.com, put in their zip code, and it will shoot out a list of clinics close to you starting closest to you to even further away. And you would just call that clinic and you would talk to them and let them know you live in the area and that you'd like to get enrolled and they would go through that process with you.

I always push for my military families because they're going to PCS, they're going to change locations and some are even going to temporarily move for deployment. So you can't take your... Say you're in Tennessee and you want to move back to your home state during a deployment, you can't use your Tennessee benefits in your home state.

But there is a process that you can go through, it's called a transfer form, and you get that form, you take it to the new state and they start your benefits right up. You don't have to go through the whole enrollment process all over again. So that's something that's very important for families to grab just to make it an easier process.

Some military bases even have clinics located on the actual installation while others are in the surrounding counties. For us, it's in the surrounding county, but there are other places like Fort Liberty just put one on their installation, so they have one there and there's other bases as well that have them.

Bruce Moody:

Dakota, this has been so inspirational as far as a ton of information regarding that. I just really encourage people to go into the program notes. We'll have a bunch of links for people to go to. You can also call Military OneSource if you have any questions and they'll help you out. But Courtney, I had a question for you about WIC. Can you use WIC in the commissary?

Courtney Paolicelli:

Yes, Bruce, you absolutely can. So stepping back for a second. So we talked about all of the nutritious foods that you can get as a WIC participant. And so the way all of this works is, and Dakota talked about this a little bit too, the nutrition benefits and specifically the food package benefits are loaded onto what's called an EBT card or an electronic benefits transfer card.

It's like a little credit card when you are enrolled in WIC, basically what you do is you take that EBT card to the commissary and you can use it as kind of like a credit card to purchase the foods that are on your WIC food package. And I have to say, we are really, really fortunate to have the Defense Commissary Agency or DECA as really as a huge partner in promoting WIC to all of our military families and all of the commissaries accept WIC benefits.

So if you are participating in WIC and you have an EBT card, you can just go shopping as you normally would at your local commissary. You look for the WIC label on the shelves because that's one way that you can identify the products that can be purchased with your WIC benefits.

And then again, when you check out, you essentially just swipe that EBT card to make your purchase. It's basically that same process as you would use when shopping in person at any other grocery store. And so, one thing that I do want to throw out here while we're talking about WIC is, I know we've been primarily talking about WIC here in the United States and on stateside, but the military also runs a program called WIC Overseas. And this is a program that's specifically for military families who are stationed internationally.

So, WIC Overseas, it's run through TRICARE. That particular program doesn't yet offer that EBT card, although I know that they've been working hard to make that transition. But for now, the WIC Overseas program, it provides participants with paper vouchers

that they can use to redeem their WIC foods at commissaries the same way that you would an EBT card if you were going to do that stateside.

So yeah, so you can definitely use your EBT card at those commissaries. And I do want to highlight that DECA has been working on a pilot program that would allow participants, WIC participants that is to redeem their benefits for food through their online platform.

And this is just something that they're piloting right now. So we look forward to hearing more about this project and how it pans out in the future. Lots of great things going on with DECA and the commissary and the WIC program.

Bruce Moody:

All right, so we're getting a lot of information here, so I'm going to try to wrap things up. But Courtney, we're going to put a bunch of links in the program notes, maybe you can talk through them.

And again, if you're a leader of people in the military, I want you to have a look at these resources and share them with your people. So Courtney, can you talk through some of the ways that people can be getting more information and support?

Courtney Paolicelli:

Absolutely. Absolutely. So I'm going to walk through a couple of different resources that are available. The first one being the Department of Agriculture's WIC website. So it's fns.usda.gov/WIC. That's just a main page from the Department of Agriculture that gives an overview of the program, just broad strokes at that federal level.

But one of the valuable tools that's available through the USDA website is a WIC prescreening tool that families can use to estimate whether they may be income-eligible to receive WIC. And so the one thing that I will note, so they've got this prescreening tool on there that walks you through a number of questions.

When we talk about income eligibility in WIC, it's just really important that our active-duty military families remember to exclude the basic allowance for housing. So exclude BAH when you're using that tool. There's a little bubble on there that reminds folks to do that, but sometimes folks miss it.

So I think that's really important to just want to remind folks that BAH is not something that's typically included when they're doing that income eligibility determination. So make sure you don't include that if you're using that prescreening tool. And so the USDA website is great.

The other big resource that we have is Military OneSource. So on Military OneSource we have the installations page, so Installations.MilitaryOneSource.mil. On that installations page you can search by program or service and you can select WIC or WIC overseas and you can find where all of the WIC clinics are located in proximity rather to your local installation.

As Dakota mentioned before, some of our installations actually have WIC clinics on post, which makes them incredibly convenient. And I use that as a segue to mention, I started my career as a dietician working in WIC on military installations in Southern California. I saw the impact that the WIC program had on military families.

And again, WIC offers so many different resources beyond just the nutrition food package. We have the nutrition education, we have the breastfeeding support, and it's just great when those things are actually on the military installation or even in close proximity. So you can use that Installations.MilitaryOneSource.mil site to figure out where your closest clinic is.

And then Military OneSource, of course, we also have a call center and a live chat feature on Military OneSource. So if you have questions or concerns about affording or accessing nutritious food, you can call and speak with somebody about resources that are available. Again, you can do that through the live chat for our military leaders. I'll also put a plug.

Then on Military OneSource, we have a military leaders economic security toolkit that has a number of different resources related not only to WIC and food security, but also to housing and to financial well-being and financial readiness.

And so that toolkit is great for leaders who are wanting to support their units and the folks within their chain of command with ensuring that they are food secure. And then additionally on Military OneSource, we also have a food security resources and support page. We're building out our MilLife Guide on food security, and you can find contacts and information for a number of food assistance and nutrition assistance programs on that MilLife Guide for food security resources and support.

And then lastly, if you're looking for data or additional information on the WIC program, the Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service and the Department of Agriculture's Food Nutrition Service, they both have really robust research sites that have information on the effectiveness of WIC.

Bruce Moody:

So, a lot.

Courtney Paolicelli:

Absolutely.

Bruce Moody:

And the two of you have so much passion for families and how to support families who ultimately are wanting to serve, and that's what we're talking about here today. So I want to wrap up real quick because running along, this is such an important conversation. I want to just get final thoughts from each of you. Let's start with you, Courtney.

Courtney Paolicelli:

So Bruce, honestly, I think the take-home message from all of this is that WIC is again, a quintessential public health nutrition program. It serves a target audience or a population of folks that have very unique nutritional needs. And that is exactly what the program is designed to do, is to help folks optimize their nutrition during those critical life cycle stages so that we can have the best possible health well-being outcomes later on down the line.

And then specifically for our military families, we have data from Dakota's research team suggesting that only about 35% of military families who are eligible for WIC actually participate in the program. And we want to get that number up.

We want to try to make sure that everybody who is eligible for WIC is reaping the benefits from this program. So just again, I implore families, I implore our military leaders to really to help connect folks connected to this program because of the many benefits that it does have.

Bruce Moody:

Thank you. Dakota, you get the last word.

Dakota Davis:

Thank you. I just want to reiterate what Courtney's saying, that this is such an important program. I've lived it. I've seen the changes that it can make, and then I see these families come in and they're living the same life that I lived several years ago, and they're having the same challenges.

But WIC is a way that we can step in and try to... Military life has its challenges, it's deployments, trainings, all of that. You don't want food insecurity on top of it. So WIC is one way we can step in and really try to handle that and help families not have one more thing to worry about.

I just want everybody to check their eligibility, regardless of rank, years in service. Take a few minutes, go to the website, put your information in, and just see if you qualify because you may be shocked, you may actually qualify and could get assistance that could really help your family.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely. Courtney Paolicelli, Dakota Davis, thank you so much for joining us today.

Dakota Davis:

Thank you. Thanks for having us, Bruce.

Bruce Moody:

Absolutely want to remind you all that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. If you have any questions about what you've heard today, we have a link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode.

Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcast because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for joining us today. Take care. Bye-bye.