



# Strengthening Food Security in Immigrant Communities

Strategies to Improve Access to School Meals, Summer Meals,  
Food Pantries and WIC

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# INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The convergence of COVID-19, an economic downturn, an impending housing crisis, and deepening social and racial inequities has increased demand for community-based food programs. While federal and state agencies work to adapt programs and manage the exponential demand, politics and political rhetoric have created both real and perceived barriers in accessing these programs.

## Immigrant Perspective

“My husband has pre-diabetes and we are saturated with medical bills. I would rather be sent to collections and pay the minimum than get benefits that will affect my immigration status.” - Luz

For immigrant communities, anti-immigrant rhetoric, the disproportionate health and economic impacts of COVID-19, and policies aimed at creating fear of enrollment in federal programs exacerbate these barriers. Most notably, the Trump administration’s public charge rule, which went into effect in February 2020, as a legal function, deems immigrants “inadmissible to the United States and ineligible to become a lawful permanent resident”[1] if they receive one or more public benefit(s).

As a political function, the public charge rule has created a chilling effect by discouraging immigrants from using public benefits as well as “affect[ing] U.S.-citizen children whose parents may disenroll them from services for fear of immigration consequences.”[2] The changing environmental and political landscape is having a profound impact on participation in, and access to, food resources in immigrant communities. Solutions to address the full participation of, and equitable distribution of food resources to, immigrant communities are essential during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Impacts of the Public Charge Rule

The Migration Policy Institute estimates that the public charge rule puts nearly 340,000 people, U.S. citizens and noncitizens alike, at risk of disenrolling from public benefits in Colorado.

[1] [Public Charge Fact Sheet, United States Citizenship and Immigration Service](#)

[2] [Chilling Effects: The Expected Public Charge Rule and Its Impact on Legal Immigrant Families’ Public Benefits Use, Migration Policy Institute](#)

# Why Focus on Immigrants?

Immigrants make up a significant portion of Colorado's total residents, accounting for 9.8 percent of the state's population. Data from U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey[3] shows that foreign-born populations are highest in the counties of Adams (15.4 percent), Arapahoe (15 percent), and Denver (15.6 percent). Areas of the state with higher or similar percentages include Eagle (18.3 percent), Garfield (14.9 percent), Morgan (13.6 percent), and Phillips (13.1 percent) counties.

Research shows that immigrant families face hunger at disproportionate rates. In one large study, 23.7 percent of foreign-born mothers reported food insecurity compared to just 12.7 percent of U.S.-born mothers.[4] A Children's HealthWatch report found that Mexican, Central American, and Caribbean mothers and children had substantially higher rates of food insecurity than U.S.-born mothers.[5] COVID-19 polling conducted by the Urban Institute[6] found that 25.5 percent of adults in families with noncitizens had experienced food insecurity in the previous 30 days, compared to 16.8 of adults in families with all U.S. citizen members. Additionally, Hunger Free Colorado's COVID-19 polling found that in December 2020, 52 percent of non-white and Latinx individuals were struggling with food insecurity, compared to 30 percent of white Coloradans.

## How to Use this Brief

This brief exists to serve as a roadmap for advocates, immigrant-serving organizations, and community-based food resource programs and organizations. This guide provides insights from immigrants and immigrant advocates on the challenges these communities face due to COVID-19 and public charge. This includes perceptions of public charge enforcement, fears of immigration authorities, and uncertainty of available resources that are creating dire circumstances for immigrant families facing food insecurity. Additionally, the brief provides strategies that anti-hunger programs can adopt to improve culturally relevant practices for diverse immigrant communities in their food offerings, messaging and staffing.



[3] [American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau \(source: Colorado Department of Local Affairs\)](#)

[4] Cook, J. Risk and protective factors associated with prevalence of VLFS in children among children of foreign-born mothers. Discussion Paper Series DP 2013-09. University of Kentucky Center for Poverty Research. August 2013.

[5] Chilton M, Ettinger de Cuba S, Cutts D, Berkowitz C, Cook J, Black M, Appugliese D, Heeren T, Frank DA. The nutrition and well-being of the youngest U.S. citizens with Mexican, Central American, and Caribbean mothers. 2007.

[6] [More Than One in Six Adults Were Food Insecure Two Months into the COVID-19 Recession, Urban Institute](#)

# STRENGTHENING FOOD SECURITY IN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES GATHERING AND SURVEY

Hunger Free Colorado hosted a Strengthening Food Security in Immigrant Communities Gathering (or the Gathering) in May 2020 in partnership with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the National Immigration Law Center (NILC), and the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition (CIRC). The Gathering registered 57 leaders, representing 37 organizations, and included a diverse mix of immigrants, immigration advocates, food policy advocates, immigrant-serving organizations, and state and local government agencies. The goals for the Gathering were to elicit ideas from these key leaders on outreach efforts related to Pandemic EBT and collaborate with those closest to immigrant communities in shaping and advising on policy.

## Survey and Data Notes

A follow-up survey that summarized the themes from the Gathering was disseminated and solicited feedback from a diverse cross-section of leaders to further prioritize strategies for improving access in immigrant communities to four food programs: the National School Lunch Program (NSLP, commonly known as free and reduced-price school meals); the Summer Food Service Program (commonly known as summer meals); food pantries; and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

We received 97 survey responses, 42 in English and 55 in Spanish. The survey categorized questions into major concerns by program and asked about barriers to access, changes to improve access and participation, and outreach strategies. Survey data was analyzed based on total responses and broken down by language (English and Spanish). Each section of this report includes a table detailing the percent of respondents in each language that responded to that question and prioritized each concern/strategy. The tables also include the percent of overall respondents that prioritized the concern/strategy. Survey questions were not required, so note that the total column may report a lower percentage than both English and Spanish columns because it includes all survey respondents, even those that did not respond to the question.

### Guiding Question for Summit Participants

How can we ensure all those eligible for anti-hunger programs receive and feel safe using their benefits?

# NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM



The National School Lunch Program (or NSLP, commonly known as free and reduced-price school meals) is a federally administered meal program by the Food and Nutrition Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

This program reimburses nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children in public and nonprofit private schools, residential child care institutions (RCCI) and some charter schools. There are two ways children are eligible for these meals through NSLP: (1) through categorical eligibility and (2) based on their family size and household income.

Categorically eligible students are those utilizing federal assistance programs (e.g., SNAP); children who are homeless, migrant, runaway, or foster youth; or children enrolled in a federally funded Head Start Program (includes comparable state-funded pre-K programs). Eligibility for family size or household income includes free lunch for families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level or reduced-price lunch for families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the federal poverty level.

**Description:** Federally-assisted meal program operating in public and some private schools. This program provides nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches to children (who qualify) every school day.

#### Administering Agency:

- U.S Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (federal)
- Colorado Department of Education (state)
- Public or non-profit private schools of high school grade or below, private residential child care, and charter schools (local)

#### Eligibility:

- Participation in Federal Assistance Programs (e.g., SNAP, TANF, etc.)
- Foster, migrant, homeless, or runaway youth
- Enrolled in the Head Start Program (federal)
- At or below 185% of federal poverty level

**Public Charge:** The National School Lunch Program is NOT part of public charge.

If you'd like to learn more about immigration and benefits, visit [KeepYourBenefits.org](http://KeepYourBenefits.org).

# National School Lunch Program in Colorado

Applications to participate in the program, reimbursements, and program requirements are all administered by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). Participating schools provide eligible school children with meals consistent with the USDA nutrition standards. According to CDE, 178 public school districts across Colorado are participating in NSLP as well as 15 private schools, 11 RCCIs, and two charter school groups. In Colorado, state legislation has expanded access to affordable school lunches by covering the copay for students who qualify for reduced-price meals, meaning that all students who qualify (for free or reduced-price meals) can receive no-cost meals at school.

The majority of school districts with the highest numbers of students on Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (Table 1) are in the Denver metro area. School districts with the highest percentages of students on Free and Reduced-Price Lunch are in the San Luis Valley and Denver metro area.

**Table 1. National School Lunch Program in Colorado: Top Five Districts, January 2020**

<u>Number of Students on Free Lunch</u>	<u>Number of Students on Reduced-Priced Lunch</u>	<u>Percent of Students on Free and Reduced-Price Lunch</u>
Denver County 1 (48,794)	Denver County 1 (10,209)	Sheridan 2 (89.9%)
Adams-Arapahoe 28J (26,118)	Jefferson County R-1 (5,640)	Center 26 JT (89.9%)
Jefferson County R-1 (20,431)	Cherry Creek 5 (4,374)	Sierra Grande R-30 (83.3%)
Colorado Springs (12,401)	Adams-Arapahoe 28J (3,682)	South Conejos RE-10 (82.7%)
Cherry Creek 5 (12,075)	Adams 12 Five Star (3,673)	Adams County 14 (82.5%)

## Concerns with the NSLP from Immigrants, Immigrant Advocates, and Immigrant-Serving Organizations

The number one concern among all survey respondents is access to food for the entire family, not just school-aged children (Table 2). This may highlight concerns of food insecurity among various members of the family. The second-highest concern by percentage, across language, and in aggregate, is about data. Particularly, data requirements to participate in NSLP, issues of data sharing and privacy for immigrant communities, and how agencies and organizations share information with each other.

[7] School Nutrition Data, February 2020, Colorado Department of Education

Not surprisingly, the third-highest rated concern is the fear of how using NSLP will impact immigration status. From the Gathering, we learned that this fear is driven by mixed messages about eligibility, public charge implications, and how data is being used in these programs (e.g., sharing with other state and federal agencies).

Table 2. Major Concerns with the National School Lunch Program

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Food for the entire family, not just school-aged children	47%	52%	26%
Concerns about data	34%	38%	19%
Fear of using NSLP because of immigration status	34%	24%	15%

## Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

The top priority to improve access and participation, across survey participants, (Table 3) is to limit the types of data and personal information collected (e.g., social security numbers). With consensus across survey participants, expanding eligibility of NSLP to other family members and the larger community was the second-highest priority. As noted above, and as shared at the Gathering, this spoke to food insecurity issues across immigrant communities and families. The third priority is to improve the application process (according to English survey respondents and overall responses). These details were shared at the Gathering and included streamlining the application process, improving communication between agencies, and limiting the information needed to apply. It is noteworthy that while the third priority for all respondents and English survey respondents is to improve the application process, Spanish survey respondents identified ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate and relevant meals as their third priority.



Table 3. Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Limit the types of data and personal information collected	63%	55%	31%
Expand eligibility for NSLP (e.g. other family members, larger community)	50%	45%	25%
Improve the application process	38%	28%	17%

# Outreach Strategies with Immigrant Communities

With respect to past and ongoing outreach strategies (Table 4), there is clear consensus across survey respondents on key priorities.

All groups, as their top priority, indicated that NSLP should create messaging that builds trust in the program. Specifically, explaining that it is safe to participate in the program without repercussions from immigration authorities.

The second priority is to conduct culturally appropriate and relevant outreach to promote NSLP.

For example, crafting messages that resonate with immigrant communities that are shared through mediums and messengers trusted by these communities (e.g., organizations and community leaders). And finally, the third priority is to have messages that promote the benefits of participating in NSLP. Examples from the Gathering include that NSLP supports additional funding for schools, reduces hunger among children, and promotes the health and well-being of families.

Table 4. Outreach Strategies

	English	Spanish	Total
Create messaging that builds trust in NSLP	72%	52%	42%
Conduct culturally appropriate and relevant outreach to promote NSLP	47%	41%	30%
Develop messaging that promotes the benefits of participating in NSLP	25%	38%	21%



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM

Address Family Food Insecurity: Participants highlighted interest in expanding NSLP to the entire family. Since these changes may be outside of the influence of advocates and programs, local NSLP sites may want to collaborate with, and connect families to, community-based food resources to address food insecurity in families.

Clarify the Purpose of Data and Data Usage: Data collection and how data is being used is still a major concern for immigrant families. NSLP should develop and disseminate messages to reinforce how personal data is being used and secured. Perceptions that data is being shared with other agencies, particularly immigration enforcement, will likely decrease participation in the program.

Waivers granted to states during the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily allow for sites to distribute meals to additional household members.

This is a temporary flexibility that should be promoted within immigrant communities. (See the summer meals section of this report for more information on this flexibility.)

Messaging that Builds Trust, Highlights Benefits, and is Culturally Competent:

Participants emphasized the importance of positive messaging for NSLP. Particularly messaging that highlights that the program is safe to participate in and is not being monitored by immigration authorities, that there are health and other benefits to children that participate in the program, and messages that are tailored and resonate for immigrant communities (e.g., culturally competent).



# SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

The Summer Food Service Program (commonly known as summer meals) is a federally funded program of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The program provides kids and teens (18 and younger) in low-income areas with free meals during the summer months and when school is not in session.



During COVID-19, federal waivers are allowing states to use this feeding model to serve children throughout the school year to ensure meals are available to all students while school operations continue to shift between in-person, hybrid and remote.

COVID-19 waivers also allow these meal sites to operate programs in areas that do not meet traditional area eligibility requirements, provide to-go meals and multiple meals at a time, and allow a family member who is not a child 18 or under to receive meals.

## Description:

Federally funded child nutrition program established to ensure that children, ages 18 and younger, can access nutritious meals when school is out for summer break.

## Public Charge:

The National School Lunch Program is NOT part of public charge. If you'd like to learn more about immigration and benefits, visit [KeepYourBenefits.org](https://www.KeepYourBenefits.org).

## Administering Agency:

- U.S Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (federal)
- Colorado Department of Education (state)
- Public or non-profit private schools of high school grade or below, charter schools (Local), local government agencies, camps, faith-based and other non-profit community organizations

## Eligibility:

- Children (18 years and younger)

# Summer Meals in Colorado

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) administers summer meals. They are primarily responsible for processing and approving applications, overseeing reimbursement claims for sites, and implementing the requirements to participate in the program. At the local level, summer camps, nonprofit organizations, schools, local government agencies, or faith-based organizations can enter into an agreement with CDE and manage the program. By doing so, they get reimbursed for meals provided at these sites.

## Concerns with Summer Meals from Immigrants, Immigrant Advocates, and Immigrant-Serving Organizations

Among survey respondents, three major concerns about the summer meals program are consistent (Table 5). The top priority for English survey respondents, and respondents overall, is transportation barriers and how that impacts access to summer meals sites (this was the second-highest priority for those completing the survey in Spanish). Spanish survey respondents identified the uncertainty around the impact of COVID-19 on children and youth as their top priority. For all participants, the third overall priority was accessing information about where and when to access summer meals sites.

Table 5. Major Concerns with Summer Meals

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Transportation barriers and accessing summer meals sites	61%	46%	28%
Uncertainty around the health impacts of COVID-19 on children and youth	32%	64%	25%
Information about where and when to access summer meals sites	32%	29%	16%



## Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

Survey results reveal important differences in priorities between those completing the survey in Spanish and English (Table 6). Spanish survey respondents prioritized creating student-friendly meals to make

them more attractive; increasing partnerships with other community food resource programs to streamline food pick-up; and ensure the availability of culturally appropriate and relevant meals. English survey respondents prioritized partnering with other community food resource programs to streamline food pick-up, establishing partnerships with food truck businesses to deliver summer meals, and extending the area eligibility waiver to allow sites in more convenient locations.

Table 6. Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Create student-friendly meals to make them more attractive and increase participation	23%	57%	20%
Partner with other community food resource programs to streamline food pick-up	48%	50%	25%
Ensure the availability of culturally appropriate and relevant meals	23%	36%	15%



## Outreach Strategies with Immigrant Communities

Once again, the top priority differs depending on language preference (Table 7). Spanish respondents prioritized promoting the benefits of participating in the summer meals program, while English respondents prioritized partnerships with local food providers.

In aggregate, English and Spanish responses all ranked connecting summer meals to other summer activities being offered as their second priority.

Table 7. Outreach Strategies

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Promote the benefits of participating in the summer meals program	55%	71%	32%
Connect summer meals program to other summer activities being offered	68%	61%	33%
Establish partnerships with local food providers	74%	61%	34%

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SUMMER FOOD SERVICE PROGRAM

## Develop Messaging to Raise Awareness of the Program and Benefits:

Participants expressed interest in more information on where and when to access summer meals sites. Messaging and resources that highlight locations, times, and transportation options to participate in summer meals may increase participation.

## Collaborate with Existing Programs and Activities:

Summer meals sites could collaborate with other food organizations to coordinate food pick-ups (e.g., food pantries and food trucks) at these sites as well as other summer activities. This coordination could address transportation barriers, address food insecurity across the family, and streamline activities and offerings for kids and teens.

## NOTE ON COVID-19

Provide Information on COVID-19 and Summer Meals Safety: As COVID-19 dictates much of our interactions, emphasizing the safety protocols in messaging could alleviate fears of families wanting to participate in the program.

## Create Kid-Friendly and Culturally Relevant Menus:

Meals that appeal to students and are culturally familiar could incentivize participation. Summer meals sites may consider how best to balance healthy and nutritious meals with offerings that are rooted in cultural foods and pique the interest of kids and teens.



# FOOD PANTRIES

Food pantries are a critical resource for those struggling with food insecurity.

Community members can access free food through a diverse range of organizations including churches, community-based organizations, health care centers, and schools. Food pantries receive food from a variety of sources, including federal commodity programs and donations and purchases through food banks, growers, restaurants, retailers, food industry associations, and food hubs.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also has two federally funded programs that support food pantries. First is the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP) that focuses on older adults (age 60+) who meet certain income qualifications. The second is The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) that provides food boxes to low-income families who are part of federal assistance programs or meet income thresholds.



## Description:

A site that distributes free food directly to community members.

## Administering Agency:

- A variety of local organizations, including churches, community-based organizations, health care centers, and schools

## Public Charge:

The National School Lunch Program is NOT part of public charge. If you'd like to learn more about immigration and benefits, visit [KeepYourBenefits.org](http://KeepYourBenefits.org).

## Eligibility:

- Varies by pantry (e.g., some may serve a specific geographic area) but many are open to all community members

## Food Pantries in Colorado

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) administers both CSFP and TEFAP in Colorado. They work with Colorado's five food banks (Food Bank of the Rockies, Care and Share Food Bank for Southern Colorado, Community Food Share, Food Bank for Larimer County, and Weld Food Bank) who distribute food to hundreds of food pantries across Colorado. Food pantries, which are housed at schools, churches, nonprofit organizations, or mobile sites, then directly serve Coloradans.

# Concerns with Food Pantries from Immigrants, Immigrant Advocates, and Immigrant-Serving Organizations

Survey responses identify a number of major concerns with immigrant communities accessing food pantries (Table 8). These responses vary across combined results and language. For example, the top concerns for Spanish survey respondents included the quality of food available to immigrant communities in food pantries and which foods and products are available in food pantries. English respondents identified clarity on why data is being collected from clients of food pantries (39 percent) and a fear of using food pantries because of immigration authorities (39 percent). With respect to the second-highest-rated concern, there was consistency on the issue of culturally appropriate and relevant foods at food pantries. Those completing surveys in Spanish identified promotion of access to food pantries for immigrant communities and fear of using food pantries because of immigration authorities as secondary concerns.



Table 8. Major Concerns with Food Pantries

	English	Spanish	Total
Quality of food available to immigrant communities	19%	30%	12%
Transparency on what foods and products are available	3%	30%	7%
Availability of culturally appropriate and relevant foods	26%	26%	13%
Fear of using food pantries because of immigration authorities	39%	26%	17%
Promoting access to food pantries for immigrant communities	10%	26%	8%

## Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

Survey responses for top-priority program vary based on language (Table 9). Spanish respondents indicated that creating a system to share what products are available at food pantries and providing cooking demonstrations on how to prepare meals with produce from food pantries as top priorities for

program changes. English respondents identified limiting the types of data and personal information collected from clients as their top priority (61 percent). Transparency on how food pantries are using personal information is the second-highest program change priority. And finally, ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate and relevant products at food pantries is a priority consistent across survey results.

Table 9. Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Create a system to share what products are available at food pantries	16%	43%	14%
Provide cooking demonstrations on how to prepare meals with produce from food pantries	13%	43%	13%
Transparency on how food pantries are using personal information	58%	39%	25%

## Outreach Strategies with Immigrant Communities

Priority outreach strategies among survey respondents are consistent (Table 10). Survey results prioritize the strategy of enlisting trusted messengers/immigrant leaders to promote food pantries most highly, followed by establishing collaborations between trusted community-based organizations and food pantries. This is consistent with what was shared during the Gathering, that cultural propinquity and familiar leaders create trust and reduce fear in accessing food pantries.

Table 10. Outreach Strategies

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Enlist trusted messengers/immigrant leaders to promote food pantries	68%	48%	30%
Collaborations between trusted community-based organizations and food pantries	52%	43%	24%
Increase staff diversity so the food pantries reflect the immigrant community	32%	35%	17%



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOOD PANTRIES

Create Strategies to Ease Fears for Immigrants Accessing Food Pantries: The Gathering and survey results continue to reiterate the fears immigrant communities are experiencing in the current political environment. In their outreach, food pantries can highlight the safety of accessing their sites and how and why data is being collected for their programs. When possible, pantries can also limit the information they request from clients.

Develop Systems to Share Product Inventories at Food Pantries: Survey results show an interest in accessible, real-time resources that share “what’s in stock” at food pantries. Either through web-based or apps technologies, sharing available products can support accessing the most-needed and culturally relevant foods.

Enlist Trusted Organizations and Messengers to Promote Services for Community: As a complement to outreach strategies with immigrant communities, food pantries may consider building relationships and partnering with trusted leaders and community organizations to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information about each other's services. Developing a mutually beneficial relationship between leaders and providers can lead to improved service integration and delivery and instill confidence that the food pantry is a trusted partner of immigrant communities and safe to utilize.



# WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) is a federally funded program of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Participants in the WIC Program are provided with a food package to supplement their diets with specific nutrients.

WIC-authorized foods include infant cereal, baby foods, iron-fortified adult cereal, fruits and vegetables, vitamin C-rich fruit or vegetable juice, eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, soy-based beverages, tofu, peanut butter, dried and canned beans/peas, canned fish, whole wheat bread and other whole-grain options. During their quarterly clinic visits and appointments, WIC participants receive health screenings, nutrition and breastfeeding counseling, immunization



screenings and referrals, substance abuse referrals, and more. Pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 with income eligibility at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level or participation in other federal programs are eligible for WIC. Additionally, applicants deemed a 'nutrition risk' by a health professional or a trained health official are eligible.

Description: Federal grants (to states) for supplemental foods, health care referrals, and nutrition education for low-income pregnant, breastfeeding, and non-breastfeeding postpartum women, and infants and children up to age five

Administering Agency:

- U.S Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service (federal)
- Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (state)
- WIC clinics, often housed in local public health agencies (local)

Eligibility:

- Infants and children up to age 5 and pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding mothers
- Income eligibility at or below 185% of the federal poverty level or automatic income eligibility through participation in Medicaid, TANF, SNAP or FDPIR

Public Charge:

The National School Lunch Program is NOT part of public charge. If you'd like to learn more about immigration and benefits, visit [KeepYourBenefits.org](https://www.KeepYourBenefits.org).

# Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) in Colorado

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) administers WIC in Colorado. CDPHE has several roles including selecting and distributing funds to participating local agencies, overseeing WIC retailers, ensuring compliance with WIC standards, standards for local staffing, and serving as a liaison to the USDA. Additionally, Colorado WIC provides resources to eligible participants including a WIC clinic and retail locator, the WICShopper app, and multilingual videos on shopping and preparing foods.

In Colorado, WIC has an expansive network of 112 WIC clinics serving 61 counties. These clinics are typically public or private nonprofit health agencies (e.g., county public health department or health system). WIC retailers are grocery stores, farmers, commissaries, and pharmacies where participants can purchase their WIC food package with an eWIC card.



To comply with COVID-19 physical distancing precautions, federal waivers allow WIC participants to have alternative (phone and online) appointments to enroll in WIC and maintain their eligibility in place of in-person clinic visits. Typically, participants must be seen in person at least every six months. Waivers also allow for food product flexibilities in cases of product shortages.

## Concerns with Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) from Immigrants, Immigrant Advocates, and Immigrant-Serving Organizations

The issues identified as major concerns are consistent across all survey respondents (Table 11). The primary concern is the impact of public charge on WIC participation. This is related to the second major concern of mixed messaging on Spanish-language media about immigrant participation in WIC. The combination of changing rules due to COVID-19, continued efforts to discourage immigrants from using government-sponsored programs, and inconsistent information are driving both fear and uncertainty in immigrant communities about WIC. (Even though WIC is not included in the public charge rule and is available to eligible immigrants, regardless of status.) The final top-rated concern is limited product eligibility in the WIC food package.

Table 11. Major Concerns with WIC

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Impact of public charge on WIC participation	58%	75%	33%
Mixed-messages on Spanish-language media about immigrant participation in WIC	52%	29%	21%
Limited product eligibility in the WIC food package	26%	25%	13%

While participants at the Gathering noted that some product restrictions have been lifted due to COVID-19, there are still concerns that the food package lacks culturally appropriate products and is hard to purchase due to a lack of WIC product labeling in many retail locations.



## Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

Based on percentages, English and Spanish survey responses are consistent with their top three priorities for improving program access (Table 12). The top priority is expanding the food package to be more flexible and allow more options for brands and sizes. The second priority is to ensure that WIC is culturally appropriate and welcoming to immigrant communities. Based on feedback at the Gathering, this includes not solely focusing on nutrition, but also issues such as affordability and meeting people where they are at. And finally, the third priority is reducing the number of visits required to participate in the WIC program. Issues such as transportation, taking time off work, and the lack of clarity on visit expectations create barriers for immigrant communities.

Table 12. Program Changes to Improve Access and Participation

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Expand the food package to be more flexible and allow more options for brands and sizes	58%	67%	31%
Ensure that WIC is culturally appropriate and welcoming to immigrant communities	52%	67%	30%
Reduce the number of visits required to participate in the WIC program	35%	29%	17%



# Outreach Strategies with Immigrant Communities

English and Spanish survey respondents agreed on the top priority for outreach strategies with immigrant communities (Table 13): Adopting changes made during COVID-19 long-term (e.g., phone appointments and video conferencing). The next priorities for Spanish survey respondents are communicating that participating in WIC does not take resources away from other eligible immigrants and improving WIC-labeled products. English survey respondents identify developing word-of-mouth and/or social media campaigns to show the value of WIC programs to immigrant communities as their second priority (35 percent). And as the third priority, the importance of promoting recent program improvements and modernizations (26 percent).

Feedback from the Gathering suggests phone appointments, eWIC cards, the breastfeeding peer counseling program, and the WICShopper app are welcomed program changes that are not widely known about in eligible communities.

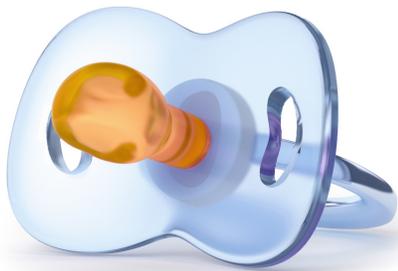


Table 13. Outreach Strategies

	<u>English</u>	<u>Spanish</u>	<u>Total</u>
Adopt changes made during COVID-19 long-term	48%	46%	24%
Communicate that participating in WIC doesn't take resources from other eligible immigrants	19%	29%	12%
Encourage retailers to improve labeling of WIC-eligible products	13%	29%	10%



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN, INFANTS, AND CHILDREN (WIC)

## Clarify that WIC is Not Considered in Public Charge:

Without a change in the public charge rule and tone toward immigrants, the public charge chilling effect will continue to compound fears and limit participation in federally sponsored programs. Clear messaging through materials, trusted messengers, and/or staff can alleviate these fears and encourage participation in WIC among eligible individuals.

## Make WIC Participation Requirements and Product Eligibility Less Rigid:

Participants in the Gathering and feedback from the survey show that communities find WIC rules restrictive and limiting. Whether these are related to food product eligibility and/or visit requirements, participants noted that rules lifted during COVID-19 are welcomed long-term changes. Local and state agencies may benefit from examining existing regulations and flexibility to look for opportunities to change these regulations post-pandemic.

## Establish Rules on Labeling of WIC-Eligible Products and Expand Product Eligibility:

At the Gathering, leaders expressed the need for a better WIC shopping experience facilitated by a broader range of WIC-eligible products that are clearly marked in stores. WIC staff and decision-makers can work with retailers to create consistent communication across retail sites that promote easier identification of WIC-eligible resources.



# CONCLUSION

Before COVID-19, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment and policies were driving immigrant communities away from crucial nutrition programs. The pandemic and economic downturn have further harmed these communities. Rates of infection are disproportionately high in these communities due to many facing a higher risk of exposure as “essential workers” and other factors. They have also been largely left out of the government’s aid and response to the pandemic. And while solutions to the economic downturn and COVID-19 are uncertain, community-based food programs provide needed respite to immigrants facing food insecurity. Immigrant leaders, immigration advocates, food policy advocates, immigrant-serving organizations, and state and local government leaders provided important insights and solutions to ensure that community-based food resources and programs meet the needs of this long-overlooked and vital community. Policymakers and decision-makers are critical to elevating these voices and creating policies that drive sustainable and equitable food access for immigrant communities in Colorado.

**For more information about this report,  
please email [info@hungerfreecolorado.org](mailto:info@hungerfreecolorado.org).**



Hunger Free Colorado connects people to food resources to meet existing needs and drives policy, systems and social change to end hunger.

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