

NCGA Working to Get Organics Included in WIC Program

BY JON FOGARTY

The Women, Infants and Children program (WIC) has been a focus of National Cooperative Grocers Association (NCGA) advocacy efforts for over a year, in an effort to ensure inclusion of organic foods in WIC approved food lists. The new Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) has listed reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act as one of her top priorities for 2010. As Sen. Lincoln puts forth a proposed bill to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry, NCGA and other members of the National Organic Coalition are urging the Senate to renew the WIC program with language that insists upon the inclusion of organic foods in WIC-approved food lists.

Retailers eager to expand access to organics

At a time when Congress and the Administration are seeking to expand access of at-risk populations to nutritious food options in their communities, the limitations in the WIC program for organic foods, and the barriers to access of WIC recipients to natural and organic food retailers, are counter-productive and counterintuitive.

Many natural foods retailers and others retailers who specialize in organic food and beverage sales are prevented from fully serving WIC recipients in their communities, due to limitations on organic foods and the bias in favor of conventional brands. These retailers are eager for the opportunity to serve WIC recipients in their stores, and many would be willing to discuss price accommodations for these customers, if provided that flexibility. However, the firm prohibition of many state WIC food lists regarding certain organic products greatly limits WIC recipients' access to the highly nutritious offerings in these stores, even if the cost differences compared to conventional brands and retailers could be accommodated.

How WIC functions

At the federal level, WIC provides grants to states for the purpose of providing basic nutrition to at-risk populations. The states use this money and their discretion to provide a list of basic food items to as many people as possible. At the level of the



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retail transaction, a WIC check is presented to the cashier for the items being purchased. The check is valid for a period between a set of dates, for a set quantity and selection of items, and not to exceed a predetermined amount. All of this information is printed on the check, and it is the responsibility of the retailer to ensure those conditions are met. In addition, there is a short list of approved brands that are eligible for purchase under the WIC program, and meeting this condition is also the responsibility of the retailer.

WIC products highly restricted, vary by state

WIC is a grant program to the states, and each state is free to design its own program and administer it as they see fit. Some states are identical

in their implementation, while others have their own set of allowances and restrictions. Washington, for example, created its own WIC rules allowing for the purchase of organic milk but restricting egg purchases to conventional small, medium, or large white eggs (no specialty, organic, or brown eggs). Organic beans and carrots are approved, while organic cheese and peanut butter are not.

All of this is not to pick on Washington—in fact they have one of the better WIC packages out of the 18 states with NCGA co-ops that NCGA surveyed in 2009. From state to state, the WIC program is dominated by a few national brands and hyper-restrictive product criteria that are designed to control costs. Many states not only prohibit organic but also prohibit purchasing in bulk or products labeled as “natural.” In a perfect world, WIC products would be chosen based on the point where quality, quantity and price converge. If this were the case, an expanded variety of products and retailers would be available to WIC recipients.

NCGA to continue efforts; how others can help

NCGA is requesting the inclusion of a provision in the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill to prohibit states from restricting access to organic foods as part of the WIC basic food instrument. This provision is similar to a 2007 prohibition issued by the Food and Nutrition Service, which administers WIC, with regard to the WIC Fruit and Vegetable

Voucher program.

If efforts to contain the costs of the WIC program focus more on the price at the register and less on the manufacturer or production method, WIC recipients will have more choices in the aisles and more control over what goes on their table, and retailers will be able to better serve more people in their communities.

While the bill is under consideration by the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, citizens can write or call their state senators to ask that the Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill include organics within the WIC program.

To find contact information for state senators, please visit www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm. ■