

# North Dakota Women Infants & Children (WIC)

## Emergency Response Plan & Procedures

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to guide activities leading to and during an emergency response affecting the services for WIC eligible women and children under 5 years of age. The central focus in WIC service delivery during and immediately after a disaster is to restore WIC services as soon as possible and to provide services to the eligible population in the disaster-affected areas.

### POLICY

- The ND WIC Program will make all efforts to maintain and/or re-establish program services during an emergency. WIC will continue to provide WIC checks to purchase supplemental food for those eligible.
- The ND WIC Program operates on a web based computer system (hosted at the State Information Technology Department, ITD) which provides WIC staff access to all WIC participant information. This system will vital in ensuring eligible families receive continued access to benefits in the event they or their local WIC agency need to be relocated.
- The ND WIC Program maintains an offsite back-up copy of the statewide WIC database (though ITD) from which service can be re-established for families already enrolled. This system will be activated as required.
- The ND WIC Program considers infants on formula the most vulnerable WIC participants in that the product provided by WIC is frequently their only food source.
- The ND WIC Program will facilitate communication with infant formula manufacturers regarding the delivery of infant formula to the lead emergency food distribution agency or other designated distribution sites in the affected area.
- The ND WIC Program will facilitate access to WIC services in North Dakota for potentially eligible families displaced by an out-of-state emergency (i.e. hurricane Katrina). USDA, Food and Nutrition Services will be consulted regarding policy and procedure modifications as needed.
- WIC local staff will be guided by these guidelines and the disaster preparedness plans developed by their parent agency. The list of home contact phone numbers for local directors and other key individuals is updated periodically and shared with local directors.

### LIMITATIONS

- The WIC Program is not a first responder in an emergency. It is not a provider of emergency food. It does not distribute food or infant formula. It does not provide checks for purchase of WIC eligible foods or infant formula to person living in-group facilities such as emergency shelters or evacuation centers.
- The issuance of WIC checks to participants is reasonable only when food delivery systems are in place. For example, if there are no retail food stores open or if there is no food on the shelf to purchase, the family is better served when referred to a food distribution site than given a check they cannot use.
- Depending on the nature of the emergency, the availability of a building or check pick-up site may not be available due to health and safety concerns.
- Since WIC is not considered a critical service by the ND Department of Health Emergency Services, families should anticipate the possibility of some delay in benefit issuance (due to reasons beyond the control of the State WIC office like getting the WIC MIS on line, or identifying alternate check issuance locations, etc.)
- The ND WIC Program provides services to two military bases. Nonmilitary personnel may be restricted from entering the base. This includes staff and participants.
- If the mail service is working, distribution of WIC checks could be accomplished by mailing checks:
  - From affected local agencies if mail service is working. (This option could be used when transportation or road conditions prohibit access to the WIC clinic or check pick-up site.);
  - From the state office;

- From an unaffected local WIC office.  
(Theft of WIC checks sent in the mail creates an unintended consequence for families and program staff.)
- State WIC staff are trained on WIC eligibility determination and check issuance, so deploying state level staff to local areas needing assistance may be an option.
- Through the services of ND ITD, the primary copy of the WIC database is housed in Bismarck and a back-up copy of the WIC database is housed in Fargo. It is possible neither would be available if both areas were affected in an emergency.
- Distribution of WIC checks is not feasible if the banking system is not operational for an extended period of time.

### **Activation and Deactivation of WIC Emergency Response**

- Upon direct orders from the State Health Officer, Deputy Health Officer, or their designee(s), the WIC Program Director will activate program level emergency response procedures when the Department activates an emergency and/or when a local WIC agency provider requests assistance due to a local situation that disrupts WIC services.
- It is critical State and local WIC program managers with a broad knowledge of WIC program operation and service delivery implement the planning for implementation of the emergency procedures.
- Emergency operations will cease upon direct orders of the State Health Officer, Deputy Health Officer, or their designee(s).

### **PROCEDURES-General Instructions Staff Duties & Responsibilities**

#### **WIC Program State Staff**

- The WIC Program Director will mobilize staff and contractors in the State office as well as in the affected community to the fullest extent needed.
- The WIC Program Director will determine if delivery of WIC services is feasible by asking: how many participants are affected and can they reach the FI issuance site; are stores open and retail purchase feasible; how many potential new participants are eligible as a result of the disaster; how long could services be disrupted and are electricity/water/communication services disrupted?
- The WIC Program Director will communicate with the USDA, Food and Nutrition Service regional office in Denver as needed to assure federal program requirements are met and for support. The Director will also communicate with WIC programs in neighboring states that may be impacted either directly by the emergency or indirectly as ND WIC participants move to their service areas. Information on ND WIC participants and checks will be offered as appropriate to ensure continued service delivery.
- The WIC Director will be responsible for overall responsibility for implementation of the plan and reporting. The Vendor/MIS coordinator will have responsibilities related to participant food instruments issuance and redemption and serve as the liaison with ITD. The Nutrition Services Coordinator will have responsibilities related to certification and food package issues.
- The WIC staff will collect information about the stability of the WIC retail food delivery systems to determine what actions are appropriate. Alternative models of service delivery will be instituted when it is determined participants have full access to purchasing food at retail stores or locations given the unique situation of the particular emergency. Factors to be considered include but are not limited to participant access to a check pick-up site or reliable mail service, electrical power for operating the clinic or other check pick-up site, availability of staff trained to determine eligibility and issue WIC checks, the availability of WIC foods and infant formula for purchase at retail locations, and the availability of the banking system to process redeemed WIC checks through the local retailer's bank, the Federal Reserve and the Bank of North Dakota.

#### **Alternative models for WIC service delivery**

Given each emergency is unique and each local community's ability to respond is different, the following alternatives are provided as examples or "tools" that may be utilized:

- A. The State Office will take responsibility to:

- Inform the USDA, Food and Nutrition Services regional office of the emergency and seek permission for implementation of alternatives to the service delivery and additional resources if needed.
  - Deploy State staff to the affected area as needed.
  - Establish and implement expedited eligibility determination procedures (Assess need and resources; Develop a proposal; Communicate expedited service changes to local staff in affected areas)
  - Review emergency procedures with local staff as requested.
  - Review and document lessons learned and revise policy and procedures as needed.
- B. If a new/different location for check pick-up and eligibility determination needs to be established, the State WIC staff will establish communication with the local WIC agency to:
- Jointly assess needs and resources
  - Develop plans considering both short term and long term implications
  - Provide additional funding and other resources as needed
  - Implement service delivery and communication plans (i.e. notify public via local media, use state WIC website to post information, notify partners, etc.)
  - Assess situation and adjust plan on a daily basis until situation stabilizes
- C. If checks need to be mailed either from affected or another local agency or the State Office, the State Office will establish communication with local WIC staff to:
- Jointly assess needs and resources
  - Develop plans considering both short term and long term implications
  - Implement a communication plan (i.e. notify public via local media, use state WIC website to post information, notify partners, etc.)
  - Implement the process
  - Assess situation and adjust on a daily basis until situation stabilizes
  - Monitor for lost and stolen checks
- D. If the decision is made to suspend WIC services and coordinate with emergency food distribution efforts, the State will establish communication with local WIC staff to:
- Jointly assess needs and resources
  - Develop plans considering both short term and long term implications
  - Activate the emergency infant formula distribution clause in the WIC infant formula manufacturer contract
  - Implement a communication plan (i.e. notify public via local media, use state WIC website to post information, notify partners, etc.)
  - Assess situation and adjust plan on a daily basis until situation stabilizes

### **Facilities**

An immediate survey should be taken of buildings and offices in the affected areas that are used to deliver WIC services. Necessary emergency action should be taken to protect property, such as moving contents and equipment, security services, etc. Any repair activity should be recorded and filed for insurance. In the event another location is needed, the state WIC staff will cooperate with the local agency to identify alternate locations, equipment, supplies and other resources required to continue service delivery.

### **Check Issuance**

Every reasonable effort will be made to continue issuance of WIC checks to participants. Participants will be directed to emergency food centers in the event that direct distribution of food becomes necessary. State and local staff will establish a list of retail grocery stores that are operational (and their hours) and share with participants. Local agencies have the option to convert participants to a “homeless” food package if retail purchase is viable, the agency is able to issue checks, and participant does not have refrigeration.

### **Specific State Responsibilities (based on the Grand Forks flood experience)**

1. Staff the phone to field calls from local WIC staff and to:

- Clarify on evacuee and newly homeless procedures
  - Relay offers of assistance from other staff
  - Compile lists of staff and their relocation contact information
  - Contact agencies serving evacuees to provide them with WIC information
  - Relay information to sites serving relocated families on disaster relief services, such as the availability of free infant formula, food shelters, available housing, etc.
2. Remind staff that through *ND WIC MIS* all staff have access to all participant information. As displaced clients re-locate to new communities, the local staff can access those participant's charts.
  3. Remind staff to call the State Office with questions on displaced clients, eligibility, nutritional risk, etc.
  4. Prepare a press release as soon as possible, reminding families of WIC services and locations of offices.
  5. Share participant lists with neighboring state WIC offices, if the disaster and relocation of families affects multiple states (include the certification beginning and ending dates to ensure that families continue receiving WIC benefits, without interruption.) Also, share information on processing WIC checks and payment information with stores in the event stores receive a ND WIC check.
  6. State WIC staff will participate in Health Department meetings to provide information, and receive updates, and to assist in coordination activities.
- B. If the State WIC Office cannot operate out of their offices:
1. Relocate operations to the nearest (unaffected) local WIC agency to set up a temporary office.
    - Notify all WIC staff (via email) of temporary contact information
    - Respond to questions
    - Prepare emergency policies, etc if needed
    - Notify the Mountain Plains Regional Office of their location and request waivers for reporting, etc. as needed
- Critical documents- not a primary concern for the state, since:
- *ND WIC MIS* has built in disaster recovery.
  - Various copies of state and national policies, instructions, procedures, are located in a variety of locations and can be found in electronic form.
  - The ND WIC policies, guidelines, instructions, etc. are located on a web site and accessible to state and local staff.

**Note: Portions of this policy were adapted from Washington WIC policy and we thank the WIC Program for their work and their willingness to share their policy and procedure.**

(Updated January 2016)