

January 26, 2026, Advisory Group Meeting

Notes:

In attendance

Jenny Barta, Kirsten Lejonvarn, Krista Early, Teresa Severson, Hillary Spray, Amy Wittnebel, Kristy Rott, Amanda Schueler, Jill Wilson, Katie Galloway, Somadee Cheam, Michelle Weberg, Maria Bernhardt, Amber Converse, Allie Lisburg, Amy Bowles, Kate Franken, Tami Matti, Tammie Edmundson, Jessie Zins: Rebecca Gruenes, Tina Breitenbach, Wendy O'Leary

Not able to attend: Terrie Jorgenson

Advisory group structure

With new members joining annually, we like to discuss the purpose of advisory group, the makeup of members, and the roles and responsibilities. Kate reiterated that the purpose of this group is to allow time and space to hear from representatives from across the state on various topics to bring in the local agency perspectives. This group is a critical tool and resource that allows us to get feedback and have discussions to make the best decisions for the whole state. We each bring different perspectives and have various challenges unique to our agencies and that makes this group stronger. It is important that all advisory members connect with the agencies they represent for agenda requests and sharing the information discussed in our meetings through various ways such as regional meetings.

Updates

As discussed on the local agency call last week, on January 9, USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins sent a letter to Governor Tim Walz and Mayor Jacob Frey notifying that USDA was suspending payments on all active awards and any future awards from USDA to the State of Minnesota and the City of Minneapolis, currently totaling over \$129.18 million. Over that weekend we were able to receive clarification from the USDA regional office in Chicago that WIC would not be affected by this action. We continue to request additional clarification from USDA on this matter but have not yet received any additional information or guidance. MDH has been able to successfully draw down federal WIC funding for routine reimbursement of program expenses thus far. At this time, we continue to believe that WIC Program funding in Minnesota will not be affected by this action. Kate is involved in a state-level food security workgroup, and this topic was discussed at the last meeting. Other state agencies that administer USDA funded programs are involved as well such as Department of Education (school lunch), Department of Children, Youth, Families (SNAP), and Minnesota Department of Agriculture (FMNP). At the time of the last meeting all agencies were still awaiting clarification about the USDA action. MN WIC will continue to administer and operate the WIC program as usual.

We recognize and realize many families and staff are dealing with high stress and challenging times throughout our Minnesota communities. We have been trying to support and point to flexibility for serving families. We are working on a guidance document to share with all of you on options for shopping and talking points with participants. This guidance document went out in the weekly update this week.

Mobile Management

Tobi discussed Twilio group texting. There is a new project in process to allow group text messaging through mobile management (MBM)/Twilio. Currently agencies are using a variety of texting platforms for group texting, and we feel this project would be helpful as it would provide the opportunity to support outbound messaging in one place. Some examples would be sending text messages for

appointment reminders and clinic updates. MDH WIC would like to have a few local agencies volunteer to serve on a workgroup and help pilot this new service. It would be helpful to have a mix of current MBM users and non-users to get input and feedback. This will involve a couple of calls to share information and coordinate the project. Please email tobi.afolabi@state.mn.us or tami.matti@state.mn.us if interested in being part of the pilot.

Scholarship opportunities for local agency staff to attend NWA conferences

Katie brought up that at the most recent NWA conference, held in MN, there were numerous state WIC staff in attendance, but not many local agency staff attended. Local Agency staff have challenges in attending in-person training related to time away from clinic and cost. A suggestion was made to offer scholarships to local agencies so more local staff could attend such training without it impacting their grant/budget. Kate mentioned the recent NWA conference that was in Minneapolis last September was focused on Technology, Program Integrity and Vendor Management. Minnesota has not hosted a NWA conference for many years and NWA makes decisions about where in-person conferences will be held. The state agency had a small staff team that helped in the planning of the conference and all state staff attending were required to sign up for several volunteer shifts (moderate sessions, check in, room monitors, etc.) We would like to create more opportunities for local agencies to attend, to expand learning and build connections with other staff across the country. We do send the advisory group chair annually to the NWA Education and Training conference, which is typically held out of state. The cost rises as conferences are out-of-state given the travel expenses. We can consider various ways to create opportunities.

Couple take away thoughts – consider maybe some of the Everyday Heros to be given the opportunity. We also ask that what is learned at those conferences we bring back to share as well. Each year there are generally four national conferences, the education and training, tech/vendor, breastfeeding/nutrition, and the policy conference (virtual always). The NWA tech/vendor and breastfeeding/nutrition conference alternate between in person and virtual annually. We generally allow only a few state staff to attend in person.

Someone asked what other states do. Many allow attendance if it is hosted by their state. Ohio only allows one person from their state office to attend, and overall, many states report funding is a huge issue. NWA in the past offered scholarships but they no longer offer them. Kate is going to check in on why. Jenny Barta is going to bring this up at the Midwest NWA local agency monthly call to seek input from other states. Agencies can use your NSA funds to send staff, but we often hear it is not easily covered in the budget. A few suggestions are to consider everyday hero winners or some of them to go in a drawing for a scholarship, perhaps our NWA voting members from advisory group, and/or caseload advisory group members. The state office will consider these options, learn about what other states may be doing, and decide whether a scholarship could be offered.

Local agency involvement in the development/functionality of the participant portal

At the NWA conference last September, there was at least one presentation that was about a participant portal. One key take away was the importance of having local agency support and buy-in early in the development process, especially since local agencies operate differently (from scheduling lengths, locations, etc.). It has been shared that MN WIC is already working on a participant portal. We discussed possibilities for either the advisory group or other local agencies' involvement in the development and implementation of the participant portal. Tami

mentioned that we are part of the spirit user group and most all the funding for portal development has been ARPA funds from ITO's in Oklahoma. Those state agencies have provided input and suggestions all along. However, we also work together and have some opportunities to offer input. We also keep a list of requests and feedback from local agencies and always push forward ideas from this list when enhancements or new projects are developed. We also get ideas brought forward from helpdesk calls and feedback. We hope to have the portal ready by summer 2027 and a pilot in the spring of 2027. We will want to pilot the new portal with local agencies and will rely on that feedback to ensure it is ready for rollout to others in the state.

Missed the Everyday Hero Awards

We offer applications for these awards every two years; however, this was missed last year. Will plan to have the award this year and keep on every two-year schedule with the next in 2028. Timelines, nomination details, and basic information about the awards will be shared at advisory group at the April meeting then weekly updates starting May 6. We will explore using redcap for collecting the nominations.

Shopping guide input on printing

Discussion on who offers printed versions of the shopping guides and if we want some printed to reflect the food package changes as of April 2026. Most of the April 2026 changes will cover the main food rule changes apart from the yogurt Vitamin D content changes, which will take place by April 2027. The shopping guides on the MDH WIC website and WIC app are current and updated. Most agencies use electronic versions with most families except for new families and WIC Vendors like paper shopping guides. Final decision was to print a limited amount.

Local agency WIC budget input and feedback

We sent an email last week asking for thoughts on requesting an annual budget from local agencies. Kate presented recently to LPHA and was asked how WIC funding works and what we gather from grantees. One piece that we don't gather but many thought it would be helpful are other WIC funding sources (Title V, TANF, LPH grant, levy funds). Some grantees are limited to only the funds from the WIC grant. Having access to see other funding sources being used for WIC might be helpful. The goals of the proposed budget form are to assure WIC funds are being managed and spent responsibly and that resources are allocated efficiently across program services, to promote transparency and accountability, to provide a clear understanding of where funds are being spent and how they contribute to WIC program expenses, to help ensure effective program management and financial oversight, and to promote transparency regarding other funding sources used to cover WIC Program expenses not covered by the MDH WIC Grant.

We would like to ask for an annual budget from each of you which is a common requirement/practice in grants management. Agencies would submit a budget for approval. It would not change the allocation as we would still use the funding formula and offer supplemental travel funds. The budget would provide details about how grantees intend to use the funds. Budget modifications could be made through a request process to allow for flexibility during the grant year. Some of the feedback given was that local agencies would need ample time as many agencies require multiple signatures, approvals are lengthy processes, and tight deadlines are challenging. Agencies would like to see items broken out even more and include line items for communication, technology, and rent.

Update MN Local Agency voting members from advisory group

In spring of 2022, NWA made updates to the by-laws. One of the changes made was to create parity in voting at the board level for state agency representatives and local agency representatives. With adding two more sections to the state agency level (vendor management and breastfeeding) this meant increasing the number of voting members from local agencies in each state to four. Previously there was only one voting member from local agencies in each state. Traditionally, in Minnesota WIC, the local agency voting member has been the WIC program advisory group chair position. The WIC advisory group discussed the need to identify three additional local agency voting members in 2024. It was decided that one representative should be from tribal nation grantees (there are seven in Minnesota), the other two should be based on caseload or region depending on where the chair is coming from to seek balance. We have an opening for one of the members. We discussed requirements and steps for voting members. No one expressed interest at the meeting, but Maria Bernhardt (Pine County) from caseload 5 group has stepped forward with interest. An email has been sent to all advisory members. All voting members need to attend the virtual NWA 2026 Annual Business Meeting on Thursday, April 30. Update: Maria Bernhardt (Pine County) caseload 5 representative will be the NWA Rep 4 voting member position.

Local agency shutdown survey results

Kate discussed the federal shutdown survey results in more depth than what was shared on the local agency call. Overall, there were positive comments. A few areas to note are concern over participant app messages directing questions to local agencies when they don't feel they know more. We direct participants to their local agencies since you are their trusted relationships/local contact. We understand you may not know more than what has been shared with the participants, but even just providing that extra reassurance that WIC is still operating and stating what you do and don't know can help.

Another suggestion was the work other counties were doing, especially around formula. Often decisions were being made above WIC coordinators level in counties. MDH WIC can't provide directions to grantees about how to meet the need for food access if federal funds for programs like WIC aren't available. There are concerns about recommending one formula over another, concern over incorrect formula being given to infants (medical), and even the supply disruption in the marketplace and disruption of breastfeeding support if infant formula is stockpiled in a community.

MDH WIC can help with data requests in these instances related to number of formula-fed infants in a community, etc. It may also be helpful to perhaps review closely the emergency response plans at the state and local levels for emergencies and disaster situations.

WIC is not set up to be an emergency food program like FEMA and relies on availability of food and formula at stores in the community. This last federal government shutdown presented issues for the first time for public health agencies due to how long it lasted, and it was challenging for everyone.

Another question was why all regular attendees at our monthly WIC calls were not invited to the weekly shutdown calls. The weekly shutdown meetings did not include the typical staff from our monthly local agency calls as we wanted to provide the information to leadership

knowing local agency leaders could then disseminate it to staff and that invites could be forwarded to anyone you wanted to attend.

Lastly was a suggestion to offer regional meetings to touch base and share between agencies in a geographic region to learn from each other and better support agencies around the state. This could offer more opportunities for discussion and sharing between agencies and the WIC consultants during challenging times like were seen during the prolonged shutdown.

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL MN 55164- 0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider