

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 25, 2023

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

Thank you for your continued efforts to promote breastfeeding in the Special Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. With the recent passage of the Providing Urgent Maternal Protections (PUMP) for Nursing Mothers Act, now is an optimal time for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to review breastfeeding support services and equipment available through the WIC program. That is why we are calling on USDA to further evaluate how WIC can best support the needs of low-income participants that wish to initiate and sustain breastfeeding for infants in a wide variety of forms.

This USDA analysis would inform and potentially enhance Congressional efforts to further strengthen the availability of, and access to, quality breastfeeding services and supplies in the WIC program to participants that choose to breastfeed infants, whether exclusively or in tandem with additional nutritional supplementation. WIC is well-positioned to bolster ongoing efforts to promote breastfeeding among all families, not solely well-resourced households that have the means and time to purchase necessary equipment, afford lactation consultants and find the critical time during work hours to pump.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends infants be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life and continue breastfeeding, as part of a comprehensive diet with solid foods, for up to two years. This position was affirmed in USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025, which included its first-ever recommendations based on life-stage, including pregnancy, lactation and early childhood. Sustained breastfeeding ensures that infants receive the nutrients, bioactive substances and immunologic protections human milk offers, which support infant health, growth and development. Studies show that infants who breastfeed are at a reduced risk for asthma, obesity, type 1 diabetes, severe lower respiratory disease, ear infections, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and gastrointestinal infections. Equally important to note are the long-term health benefits for women who breastfeed, including lower risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. Thus, the Federal Government should continue to work to support our Nation's breastfeeding mothers and families by increasing access to breastfeeding support services and protections.

The 2022 infant formula shortage, which led to unprecedented challenges for families and especially for families dependent on the WIC program, also underscored the potential pitfalls of only providing infant formula to WIC participants. WIC participants and low-income families have also historically breastfed at lower rates than the broader population, in part due to a broad array of structural factors that play a considerable role in ensuring the continuation of


breastfeeding. A lack of WIC program guidance and benefits should not be another barrier families must face.

Decisions on how to feed an infant should not be restricted by structural barriers, such as outdated WIC program guidance and benefits. That is why we also urge USDA to work with States to identify and remove barriers in State WIC policies and provide families with the opportunity to breastfeed, should they wish to do so. USDA's proposed updates to allow breast pumps to be classified as a program benefit is a strong start to this important goal. This change will allow greater access to breastfeeding supplies and services for mothers and families seeking to utilize these resources and ensure their child receives the best nutrition possible. To complement these changes, we also urge USDA to disseminate information to State WIC agencies who do not have any published, or easily accessible information regarding the availability of breastfeeding supplies and services. Lastly, we request that USDA engage with States whose policies contain requirements that contradict the basic science behind breastfeeding, such as requiring Participants to be fully breastfed for four weeks, in order to qualify for a breast pump, and update these archaic restrictions.

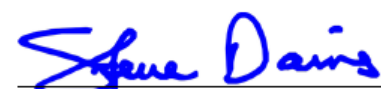
The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023 directed the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) to collect information from all WIC agencies and provide a report, within 180 days, detailing conditions State WIC agencies may consider, or requirements they impose, when determining whether a WIC participant may access breastfeeding supplies and services through the WIC program. To support the development of the requested report, we request that FNS consult experts, including physicians serving on the American Academy of Pediatrics Section on Breastfeeding and WIC State Breastfeeding Coordinators, on best practices that State WIC agencies may incorporate into their respective programs. FNS should also employ actuarial analysis to examine the true cost-benefit impact of increasing access to breastfeeding supplies and services—including lactation specialists and equipment that enable the expression of milk and safe storage of expressed milk—which often represent negligible near-term costs for insurance carriers and providers but deliver long lasting benefits through population-level health outcome improvements.

As FNS develops its report to Congress examining State WIC program requirements for accessing breastfeeding supplies and services, we ask that the Department concurrently work to encourage every State WIC agency provide accurate information regarding the availability of breastfeeding supplies and services to participants. Most importantly, USDA should work with States to expeditiously eliminate outdated breastfeeding supplies and services requirements that are inconsistent with current medical guidance. We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to working with you on this important topic.

Sincerely,



Tammy Duckworth
United States Senator



Steve Daines
United States Senator