

E.3. Response to Public Comment 3 from National WIC Association and NINAWC

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Dear National WIC Association and National Indigenous and Native American WIC Coalition Colleagues,

FNS has received your comments on Docket ID FNS-2025-0039. We thank the National WIC Association (NWA) and the National Indigenous and Native American WIC Coalition (NINAWC) for their support and thoughtful and detailed feedback, as well as our ongoing partnership. A summary of what this study is doing in response to your comments is provided below:

1. Respecting Tribal Sovereignty and Data Collection

The study is designed to support and uphold Tribal sovereignty. Respect for Tribal sovereignty is reflected in the study design as Tribal participation is voluntary and contingent on each Tribe's own decision-making authority. Tribal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval will also be obtained if necessary.

A formal consultation with Tribal leaders took place before the study's launch. We will continue to engage Tribal leaders throughout the study. The study contractor's team is composed of experienced researchers in WIC and Tribal research, has convened a Technical Working Group (TWG) of Tribal and U.S. Territory experts, and convened a WIC Participant Experience Council (PEC) that periodically provides input on the study to ensure study methods and processes align with Tribal cultural norms and customs to the extent possible. The study contractor has also conducted two webinars and listening

sessions (recording available upon request) with WIC State and local agencies to share the study's goals, objectives, and plans.

FNS appreciates your comment regarding the importance of developing WIC eligibility and coverage rates for Tribal Organizations (referred to as ITOs) and American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) populations. We recognize the critical importance of improving representation of ITOs and AI/AN populations in WIC eligibility and coverage reporting. Additionally, we acknowledge the historical limitations in Census-based datasets, particularly the small sample sizes that have constrained our ability to produce reliable estimates for these populations. FNS intends to use this study to collect input directly from Tribal WIC leaders to inform improvements to our WIC eligibility and coverage estimates for ITOs and AI/AN populations.

2. Minimizing Burden

FNS acknowledges burden-related concerns and has designed the study to minimize burden. To minimize participant burden, the study will rely heavily on existing data sources, such as information contained in WIC State Plans when possible, and participation in the study is voluntary. Study instruments are also being streamlined based on pilot testing results and to avoid unnecessary duplication. The study team will offer flexible scheduling to respondents and data collection activities will be tailored to each agency's capacity and schedule to reduce disruption.

3. Quality, Utility, and Clarity of the information

FNS agrees with your comment about the importance of capturing the full range of experiences across Tribal Organization and U.S. Territory WIC agencies. FNS is open to including more local agency ITOs in the study for in person and virtual visits if fewer than all WIC State agency ITOs and U.S. Territories agree to participate. While the study is not designed to conduct in-person visits with every ITO, the approach balances representation and feasibility to ensure meaningful participation across agency types. FNS also plans to include some Urban Indian Health Organizations.

The study will follow community-engaged research practices. For example, the contractor will hold virtual meetings where they will share preliminary findings with participating agencies to ensure we are interpreting and communicating the findings in a way that accurately reflects WIC participating agencies' experiences. The contractor will keep study participants informed throughout the study period by sending email updates to ensure study findings are communicated in transparent and useful ways to participating agencies and Tribal leaders. The contractor will also incorporate input from the TWG on the types of information and the written products that would be of most use to WIC agencies.

4. Respecting Data Sovereignty

FNS incorporated the concept of Tribal data sovereignty into the data collection and analysis plans. The study team will adopt principles aligned with the Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics, (CARE) for Indigenous Data Governance. For example, informed consent is required for participation and data collection, and analysis will be governed and respected by data-sharing agreements with each agency.

FNS appreciates the strong support expressed for this study and the detailed recommendations provided. These comments will inform study implementation to ensure the study is conducted in a way that respects Tribal sovereignty, minimizes burden, and produces key takeaways that are both useful and actionable for FNS, and for Tribal and U.S. Territory WIC agencies. We look forward to ongoing collaboration with NWA, NINAWC, and Tribal partners as this work proceeds.

Feel free to reach out to us at any time with any further comments or suggestions or to explore further collaboration with us regarding this important study.

Sincerely,

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