

# Piloting Designs to Improve WIC Program Participation

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Helping families access nutritional benefits with behavioral science

**In 2018, we partnered with two local WIC agencies in California, Watts Healthcare Corporation WIC in Los Angeles (Watts) and Santa Clara County WIC in San Jose (SCC), to translate insights from our earlier research around barriers to the WIC experience into pilot experiments. With both agencies, we designed, implemented, and tested interventions to improve appointment attendance, which is necessary for families to claim their food benefits. Additionally, we designed an intervention to improve families' attendance at the recertification appointment required to prove eligibility, a common drop off point for families nationwide.**

## Summary

The United States Department of Agriculture's Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) improves well-being for young children and their families by providing healthful food, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health referrals. Evidence shows that **WIC works**—with participation linked to decreased infant mortality, and improved cognitive functioning in young children.<sup>1</sup>

Eligible families can continue using the program until their children turn five.<sup>2</sup> However, some families who receive support from WIC miss out on claiming all of their food benefits from the WIC agency. **In particular, many researchers and practitioners have identified the recertification appointment around a child's first birthday—when participants are required to bring in documents that prove their eligibility for the program—as a common drop-off point.**

In an average month, about 365 participants are eligible to recertify at Santa Clara County WIC in San Jose (SCC), while about 280 participants are eligible to recertify at Watts Healthcare WIC in Los Angeles (Watts). Historically, at both SCC and Watts, around one-third of these participants do not complete the process, which means they lose future benefits. For example, during a span of several weeks in 2018, one in every five participants scheduled for an appointment at SCC did not show up. When participants miss appointments, they are able to come back to the agency at a later date to receive their food benefits. But some participants miss appointments and don't return to the program, even though their family is still eligible to receive support from WIC. If families drop off after their child turns one, that means they lose up to four years of healthy food and services from WIC.

## Highlights

- ▶ Missed WIC appointments can result in families leaving the WIC program and losing up to four years of healthy food and service benefits.
- ▶ Confusing or ambiguous appointment information is more likely to result in missed appointments.
- ▶ Behaviorally informed reminders can increase attendance, but behavioral science also makes the case for simply eliminating onerous requirements to support health and well-being.

<sup>1</sup> Carlson and Neuberger (2017). *WIC Works: Addressing the Nutrition and Health Needs of Low-Income Families for 40 Years*, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

<sup>2</sup> See how WIC coverage varies by child's age in Table 4.6 in Carole Trippe et al., "National- and State-Level Estimates of WIC Eligibility and WIC Program Reach in 2017, Final Report: Volume I," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, December 2019"

Our earlier [research](#) in 2016 identified that when participants don't attend WIC appointments, or stop participating in the program altogether, it's not always because they don't want or need the services. Instead, some participants don't find the long-term value of the program salient, are unclear about the purpose of appointments, or simply forget to prepare for their appointments before it's too late.<sup>3</sup> Administrators at both Watts and SCC were interested in using behavioral design to create solutions that overcome such barriers to improve appointment attendance and increase the number of families continuing to participate in the program, after the one-year mark.

## Solution

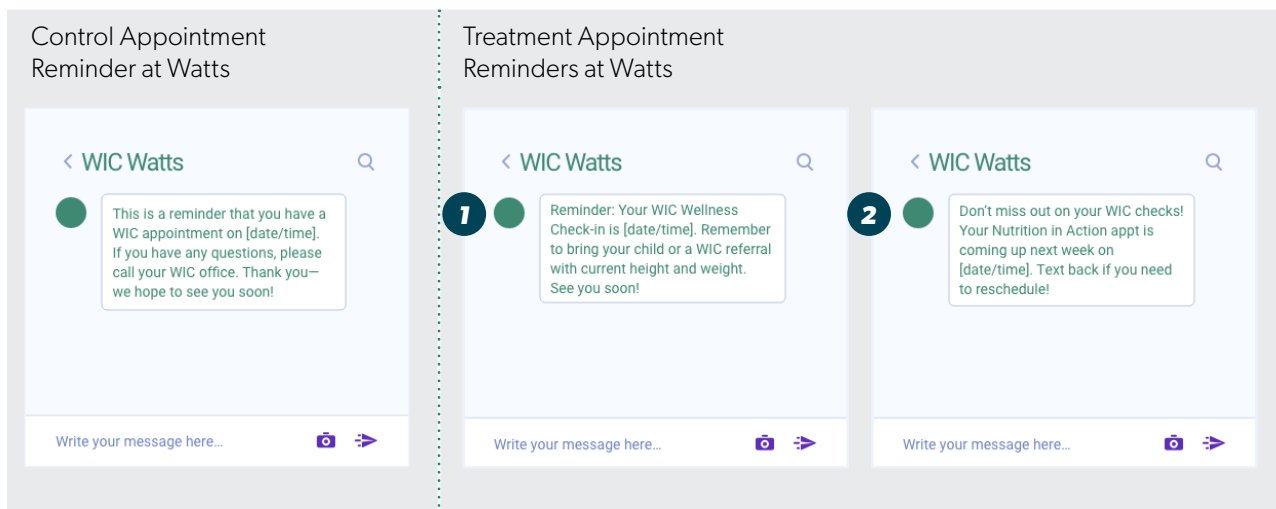


### Design 1:

Behaviorally informed appointment reminders to increase appointment attendance.

Before our partnership with Watts and Santa Clara, both local agencies had an appointment reminder system in place that sent out generic text message reminders the day before a scheduled appointment. We leveraged principles from behavioral science to update the language and timing of the reminders to make the actions necessary to prepare for a WIC appointment even more salient to participants.

**Figure 1:** Design Features of Behaviorally Informed Appointment Reminders



- 1 Personalizing** the message by including the specific items participants are expected to bring.
- 2 Framing** the benefits using loss aversion to emphasize the immediate value of the appointment.
- 3 Timing** an additional reminder to be sent out a week before recertification appointments to give participants time to prepare their documents.

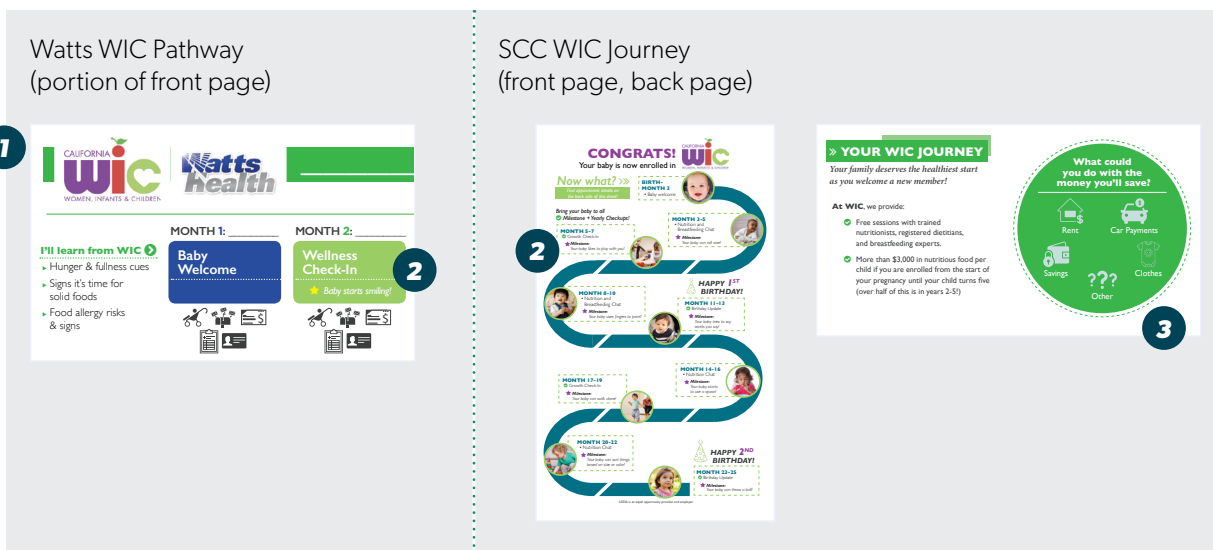
<sup>3</sup> Grodsky, Violante, Barrows, and Gosliner (2017). Using Behavioral Science to Improve the WIC Experience: Lessons for the Field from San Jose, California, *ideas42*.



## Design 2: WIC Roadmap to improve retention after one year.

To address the behavioral bottlenecks associated with continued WIC participation after the first year, and specifically with attendance at the recertification appointment, we designed a participation “Roadmap” illustrating two years in the program for staff to share with clients. The purpose of this Roadmap was to decrease the perceived hassles of the recertification appointment, increase the perceived value of the program, and ultimately boost intentions to remain in the WIC program for longer than a year. The Roadmap aimed to do this by leveraging three key behaviorally informed design features.

**Figure 2:** Design Features of Watts WIC Pathway and SCC WIC Journey



- 1 Simplifying information** about the purpose of upcoming appointments, including using icons to denote the items participants are expected to bring with them (the backside of the Pathway included a key defining what each of the icons mean).
- 2 Reframing** program to align with baby development milestones in the first two years of life.
- 3 Enhancing the perceived value** of five-year participation by making long-term financial gains more salient.

## Results



### Design 1:

Behaviorally informed appointment reminders to increase appointment attendance.

We ran a randomized controlled trial to test the effectiveness of our redesigned appointment reminders. All participants who had an appointment scheduled in October 2018 at Watts, and March 2019 at SCC, and who had already opted to receive text message appointment reminders, were randomly assigned to receive updated, behaviorally informed appointment reminders or continue receiving the typical reminders sent by the agency. At Watts, families who received the redesigned appointment reminders were 3% more likely to attend their appointments—the equivalent of helping 15 additional families per month come to the agency to claim their food benefits and receive nutritional or breastfeeding support from WIC staff. At SCC, where an implementation error in the SMS platform led to messages sent with improperly customized information to participants about their appointments (increasing ambiguity and confusion), there was a 4% decrease in appointment attendance. **Together, these results present clear evidence that many participants who miss their appointments are indeed influenced by barriers like ambiguity or confusion, and there is an opportunity to improve outcomes in program engagement by enhancing existing communications with principles from behavioral science.**



### Design 2:

WIC Roadmap to improve retention after one year.

We ran another randomized controlled trial to understand the impact of our Roadmap on recertification rates. The rollout of the Roadmap began in April 2018 at Watts and June 2018 at SCC. Over a three-month period, staff in the treatment sites provided the Roadmap to all participants attending their infant enrollment appointment. We found that the WIC Roadmap was not successful at increasing retention when the child turned one year old or improving appointment attendance more generally. We hypothesize that the Roadmap intervention, despite its behaviorally informed content, added another task to staff's to-do list during an appointment already packed with information, making it difficult to implement effectively. Additionally, we learned that families would've found the Roadmap more effective if they were prompted to use it a day or two in advance of their next appointment, when they would be actively taking steps to prepare for it. While the results were disappointing, this experiment provides useful information for future interventions—especially around the importance of delivering new materials to participants at the appropriate times, in a way that doesn't burden WIC staff.

## Lessons Learned and a Path Forward

Our appointment reminder intervention demonstrated that the way WIC agencies communicate with their participants matters, and enhancing messaging with behavioral design (and proper pilot testing) can make real differences in program participation.

An additional lesson underscored from this pilot is that the channel used to deliver materials to participants is essential to success. We imagine that the content of the WIC Roadmap could be more successful as a series of tips sent via text message to participants about the long-term value of WIC and its alignment with a child's development, in addition to timely reminders of what to bring to appointments in the days before they are scheduled (rather than months in advance).

However, the insights from our work aren't limited solely to the optimization of WIC agency communications. We can imagine bigger and bolder improvements in program participation with smart policy redesign that removes hidden costs to participants' time and attention, and encourages participants to use the benefits of the program in ways that they know are best for their families. For example, the number of participants exiting the program prematurely would likely decrease if the recertification requirement at a year was eliminated, and children who qualified for the program as infants are able to continue receiving benefits until they turn five without providing any more documentation.

***Overall, reforming the program to create slack for families living in a context of uncertainty, identifying and removing aspects of the program that cost participants significant amounts of time and attention, and creating a dignified user experience for participants will be the most reliable way to increase long-term participation and reduce the drop in participation at the one-year mark nationwide.***

You can find more details on the results and insights learned in our white paper, [Learning How to Improve Retention in WIC](#).