

Appointment Reminders Focused on Equity and Scale

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Exploring ways to use text messages to make it easier for Black families to attend WIC appointments

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) closes gaps in racial disparities for infant and maternal health outcomes. But simply enrolling in the program isn't enough—many WIC families don't make it to their WIC appointments, a necessary touchpoint for receiving healthy foods and nutrition education, among other supports. We used behavioral science to design appointment reminders to meet the needs of Black families participating in WIC.

Summary

There are many reasons people don't show up for appointments, and appointments for food assistance programs are no different. In the case of the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC)—which provides families living at or below the 185% poverty line with healthy foods and nutrition education—individuals must attend appointments at the WIC agency every few months in order to have their food benefits issued before they head to the grocery store to redeem them. Many WIC participants experience small hassles in the days leading up to their appointment, like tracking down necessary paperwork for program participation, or simply finding a ride to the agency. When participants miss these appointments, they lose out on the important benefits of WIC like food assistance, nutrition education, and lactation support. While these individuals often want and need WIC's support, such behavioral barriers can lead them to miss appointments or drop out of the program altogether, missing out on potentially critical health benefits for their families.

From previous work with local WIC agencies, we know that sending well-timed text message reminders to families the day and week before their scheduled appointments can make it easier for families to attend. In this project, we worked with the California Department of Public Health WIC Division (CDPH/WIC) to create text message reminders for WIC appointments that could be deployed not just to participants of a single agency, but to WIC participants statewide, reaching nearly 950,000 people.

Because infant and maternal health outcomes are worse for Black families than other groups—and because WIC is one of the programs that can directly impact these outcomes—with this work we aimed to design new text message appointment reminders with the unique needs of Black families in mind. After testing more than 30 appointment reminders, **we found that appointment reminders that make it easy to reschedule when necessary and create slack for participants to come in even when they don't feel fully prepared resonated best with Black WIC participants.** We recommended a suite of appointment reminder messages to CDPH/WIC that leveraged these insights, and we encourage other

Highlights

- ▶ WIC provides families at or below the poverty line with food and nutrition assistance.
- ▶ Small hassles often cause participants to miss appointments or drop out of the program altogether—meaning they lose out on the benefits available to them.
- ▶ The most effective appointment reminders take the guesswork out of preparation and allow for easy rescheduling.

state and local WIC agencies to consider our research and sample messages as they innovate with their own appointment reminder systems.

Barriers to appointment attendance for Black families

We conducted a literature review of research from behavioral science and related fields to explore the conditions faced by Black families that might influence their experience preparing for WIC appointments. Because we know that not all valuable knowledge gets captured in the academic literature, we also engaged experts in Black infant and maternal health—including local and state WIC staff, equity strategists, community leaders, and facilitators from California’s Black Infant Health Program—to challenge and add nuance to our research. Together, the literature and guidance from experts pointed us toward three barriers to appointment attendance for Black families participating in WIC.

The first barrier is that the looming sense of not feeling “prepared enough” for an appointment can cause families to opt out of their appointment.

In our [previous research](#), we found that all WIC participants, including Black WIC participants, sometimes lack the time or information to fully prepare for WIC appointments, even though their benefit is running out. The process can feel confusing—depending on the family, appointments can be scheduled for every month or every six months. Additionally, not all appointments are for the same purpose. Preparation could include tracking down paystubs to prove income eligibility, going to the doctor to get a copy of a child’s bloodwork, or remembering to bring a utility bill for proof of address.

We learned from experts working in local WIC agencies that often when participants are missing a document, WIC is still able to offer food benefits in the short term while they track down their needed materials. However, we also learned that many WIC participants are not fully aware of this policy.

“Some people don’t have their immunization card and then they think they can’t come in.”

–Expert interview with WIC staff

In other words, participants will not attend an appointment when they’re missing a document due to a misperception about needing to be fully prepared—so a small barrier, like having the right utility bill, can get in the way of participants’ receiving the healthy food and services that WIC can provide.

There’s also significant uncertainty around rescheduling.

Nearly all parents have had an unexpected emergency that required them to reschedule an appointment. WIC families may face additional unexpected emergencies, such as not having the budget to call a cab if their car breaks down or call in a babysitter when daycare randomly closes. And for Black WIC participants, who are more likely to be exposed to [irregular and unpredictable work hours](#), flexibility in WIC appointment scheduling and rescheduling is even more crucial.

We learned from talking with experts at local WIC agencies that staff are happy to reschedule appointments with participants whenever needed. However, we know from behavioral science that an action like rescheduling is not always straightforward for participants even when it's expected from staff. Uncertainty around whether it's acceptable to reschedule and being unsure about the process for making a new appointment time can lead participants to simply skip out on the appointment altogether.

Lack of representation and harmful societal narratives about poverty and help-seeking influence appointment attendance and WIC participation more broadly.

When Black WIC participants don't see other participants or staff who share their racial identity in WIC clinics, it can cause them to [question whether they belong](#). Research from a task force assembled by the California WIC Association found that many Black participants in WIC felt underrepresented when attending their WIC appointments.

In addition to a lack of representation in the WIC clinic, our subject matter experts emphasized that harmful narratives around poverty and public benefit access in the United States [discourage Black people](#)—and Black women in particular—from participating in safety net programs, like WIC.

"I was always taught, 'Don't rely on these types of programs. Go to work. Don't be dependent.'"

—WIC staff and past participant

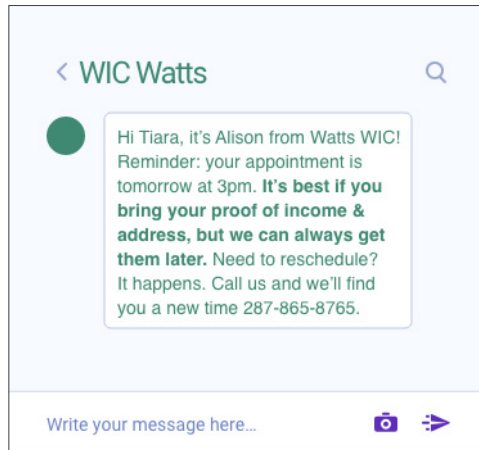
Together, a lack of representation and harmful and false narratives about program participation may prevent Black participants from attending their next WIC appointment, or indeed from staying in WIC altogether. While these are large, complex barriers to program participation and engagement, we wanted to test whether we could (or should) address them using text message appointment reminders.

Designing appointment reminders using behavioral science principles

To create text message reminders that address these barriers for families, we drew on our [Poverty Interrupted](#) principles—cut costs, create slack, and reframe and empower—that are especially relevant for designing for the context of chronic scarcity, which many [WIC participants face](#). We generated three tactics for designing text message reminders to support WIC appointment attendance for Black families.

1) Cut the costs: Give participants leeway to come unprepared.

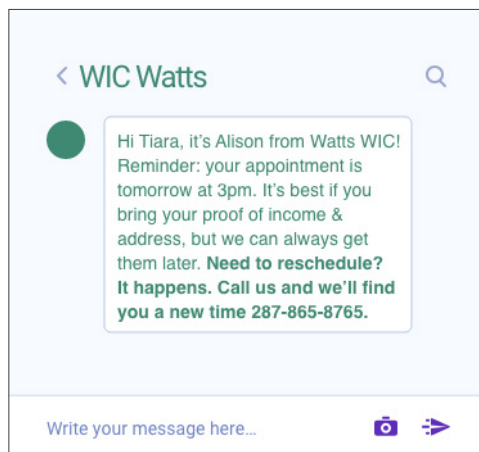
Participants must bring proper documentation for WIC appointments to prove they are eligible to participate. But we learned from experts that this need not be a barrier that prevents families from attending appointments, since WIC can give participants food benefits in the short term as they track down the extra document or two needed. We designed an appointment reminder that clarified this flexibility, informing participants that they can still attend their appointment even if they need more time to get their documents.



EXAMPLE 1: Use clear language that it's better to come unprepared than not come at all.

2) Create slack: Build in a backstop to reschedule when emergencies happen.

WIC appointments are scheduled a month or more in advance. But participants may not realize that they may need to reschedule until the day or so before the scheduled appointment time. To create a clear and timely moment of choice around rescheduling, we designed a reminder to underscore that needing to reschedule is something staff anticipate. We also included a phone number in the message so participants can take immediate action.

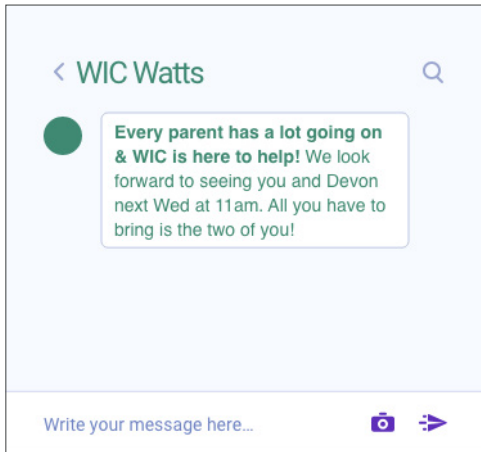


EXAMPLE 2: Include a phone number to make it easy to reschedule.

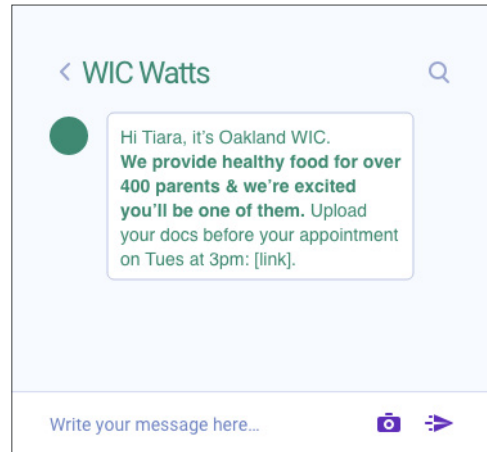
3) Reframe and empower: Promote positive identities.

Research shows that families benefit most from public benefit programs like WIC when they experience a sense of **agency and dignity** while participating in them. To address the harmful narratives around WIC participation for Black participants, we used the text message reminders as an opportunity to introduce

positive and welcoming narratives around WIC. For example, in one of the messages we reframed WIC participation around an experience all caretakers can relate to: being busy. Additionally, we created a message that used social norms to show participants that other people in their community, who they may know, participate in WIC.



EXAMPLE 3: Frame WIC participation around being a “busy parent.”



EXAMPLE 4: Social norm to create visibility around WIC participation.

Appointment reminders that built in flexibility and backstops were most effective

We did usability testing to gather information on participants’ perceptions and preferences around the messages. We spoke with a total of 12 Black participants using 30-45 minute virtual interviews. One limitation of our sample is that we talked only with Black mothers and did not explore the potentially unique barriers for Black fathers, grandparents, foster parents, or other caretakers who participate in WIC.

We found that participants responded well to text message appointment reminders that made appointment preparation and rescheduling easier. In particular, respondents reported being “calmed” by messages that affirmed that it is acceptable to reschedule. Participants also appreciated seeing the phone number to reschedule in the message, which would save them the time and effort of finding out how to reschedule.

“When we need to reschedule, and we don’t see someone telling us we can, we just don’t want to deal with it. So we just don’t do it. So it’s calming ... even with this not being a real scenario, just seeing this, it made me feel better.”

-WIC participant, San Bernadino

“Sometimes I have a lot going on and a lot of phone numbers and I can’t keep track so if I have that phone number there and it’s immediately available, that’s great.”

-WIC participant, West Oakland

We found that text messages weren't a good vehicle for addressing representation and harmful narratives. While participants appreciated the sentiment of the messages, they didn't think that an appointment reminder was the right channel for a belonging message.

"It's almost like, when you get a bill, you don't want to see all the stuff at the top. I just want to see how much I owe. I don't care about 'How's your day' blah blah. Just tell me what it is."

-WIC Participant, San Bernadino

"We wouldn't take that serious. Even though it's nice, it's just like whatever if I can come, I can."

-WIC Participant, West Oakland

Next steps

While this work was focused on addressing barriers for Black WIC participants to support increasing health equity, our [previous research](#) suggests that all WIC participants can benefit from appointment reminders that minimize the burden of appointment preparation. As our partners at CDPH/WIC adapt and implement these best practices into their statewide appointment reminder system, we recommend that other state WIC agencies, and human service programs in general, consider these best practices when designing text message appointment reminders at scale.

We also found that psychological barriers to program participation for Black families—including lack of representation and harmful narratives—need to be addressed in other ways, beyond text message appointment reminders. We look forward to future research that explores how [narrative change around poverty](#) can address these psychological barriers for participants and promote dignity, autonomy, and justice in the design of human service programs.