

# Improving participant satisfaction with Texas WIC

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Pilot tests of a goal-setting tool and appointment roadmap at three WIC agencies in Texas

**To improve participant satisfaction during the certification appointment for The Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), we designed, implemented, and tested two designs in three WIC agencies in Texas. The designs included a visual Roadmap to help participants understand and follow the appointment process, a small toy corresponding with the Roadmap that kept participants' children occupied during the appointment, and a goal-setting tool to track nutrition goals. We tested the Roadmap and toy design and found that it increased overall satisfaction with WIC visits, suggesting that small changes can reduce uncertainty and improve the WIC experience for families.**

## Summary

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, better known as WIC, provides food, breastfeeding support, nutrition education, and health referrals to families from pregnancy through a child's fifth birthday. In 2019, the program served over 8 million families in any given month.

To remain eligible for WIC nutrition benefits, families must complete periodic certification appointments at WIC clinics. These appointments involve a number of steps, including an initial check-in, income eligibility screening, a height and weight assessment for the child, breastfeeding counseling, and nutrition counseling—which includes a goal-setting activity for families. All of this must be done before families are given their benefits. Participant satisfaction with Texas WIC visits, measured through an ongoing SMS survey, is high due to the dedication of WIC staff. However, the many steps involved in certification appointments can sometimes be a source of confusion and uncertainty for participants, especially if they are new to WIC.

Through qualitative work, including interviews with both clinic staff and WIC participants, we identified a number of behavioral bottlenecks negatively impacting participant satisfaction. Families reported being frustrated by the ambiguity around the appointment steps and the uncertainty around waiting times. For example, newcomers to WIC did not know what to expect from their appointment and were not able to plan their days around it because they did not know how long the process would take. Additionally, we found that while staff do their best to get through appointments quickly and effectively, they also have many other demands on their time. This means that counseling appointments often do not create room for meaningful conversation between staff and participants. This is especially true around nutrition counseling, when participants are expected to set actionable goals for their children (for example, “eat iron-rich foods every day,” or “eat one piece of fruit every day”).

## Highlights

- ▶ Small hassles, such as ambiguity about appointment steps, can be a source of dissatisfaction with WIC families.
- ▶ Behavioral designs that create slack for participants, reduce ambiguity, and eliminate hassles can be an effective way to improve the WIC experience.

This is in line with our previous [research](#) on the WIC experience, which suggested that small hassles in the appointment process can be an important source of dissatisfaction for families. Together with Texas WIC staff, and with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, we set out to identify and design solutions that could improve participant satisfaction and create slack for both staff and families during certification appointments. We rolled out our designs and tested the efficacy of an in-appointment ‘Roadmap’ sheet and toy for participants’ children in agency locations in Lubbock and Edinburg, Texas. We also user-tested a goal-setting design for the nutrition counseling portion of the appointment in Port Arthur, Texas, but were unable to collect all the data needed to fully measure its impact due to COVID-19 constraints.

However, we found that our Roadmap design led to a significant increase in participant satisfaction, as measured by the existing SMS survey used by WIC to assess visit experience. This suggests that designs that create slack for staff and participants, reduce ambiguity, and eliminate hassles can be an effective way to improve the WIC experience.

## Designing a new Roadmap and children’s toy to streamline the process and reduce ambiguity for participants .....

When we first talked to clinic staff and participants during our diagnosis, we found that staff who first greet and talk to participants did not always explain the appointment process at check-in. This meant that participants often did not know what to expect from their visit, even after check-in.

Our design laid out the six steps in a certification appointment — check-in, income eligibility, height and weight, breastfeeding counseling, nutrition counseling and issuing benefits — with spaces to be checked off as they are completed (see Figure 1). This ‘Roadmap’ more clearly sets expectations and also provides answers to frequently asked questions about each step, including the activities involved, documentation required, and even guidance on what questions to ask. By providing key information about every step in one place, the Roadmap reduces the hassles faced by participants when trying to learn more about their visit.

We also created a component for children. Children are given a ring on which they collect a star shaped toy at each step of the appointment that corresponds with the colors on the Roadmap, and they are able to take it home afterward (see Figure 2). Through the toy and the check boxes on the Roadmap itself, we showed families the progress they are making, and also provided a source of entertainment during appointments for children, keeping them occupied while parents meet with staff. This creates slack for families, giving participants more bandwidth to engage with staff during the appointment process.



Figure 1: Roadmap design



Figure 2: Star toy

Throughout the project, we prioritized creating designs that would fit into existing clinic routines. From our California WIC work, we know that adding new materials can be disruptive and ultimately add extra burden to staff. To mitigate this during implementation, we kept track of staff feedback during our weekly calls with the clinics, taking note of any issues reported, and burdens identified.

We implemented our Roadmap and toy design in two clinics—Lubbock Freedom WIC and Edinburg WIC—and used the data collected through the WIC follow-up SMS survey to assess whether it had had an effect on WIC participant experience. Using a differences-in-differences approach, we found that the design led to a 14-percentage point increase in participant satisfaction, as measured by the survey. Participants were more likely to say that someone had explained the appointment process to them at check-in and that they were satisfied with the explanation provided.

Our results are limited by the small sample size and period of intervention, which was cut short due to the COVID-19 crisis. Since other WIC agencies have expressed interest in the design, we are exploring ways to adapt it to the COVID-19 reality (for example, by creating a digital Roadmap to be distributed by text message or email), and discussing opportunities for scaling.

## Testing a photograph goal-setting tool to help participants keep track of their nutrition goals .....

Staff and participants often do not have the slack to have meaningful conversations during the nutrition goal-setting step. As a result, the activity can feel rushed. We designed a take-home tool to make the goal-setting activity more salient and also remind participants of their goal (see Figure 3). Staff take a photo of the child or family during nutrition counseling, place it in a magnet frame, and write a goal on it to take home as a reminder (for example, “Eat one piece of fresh fruit a day”). By having the goal tied to a photo of the child, we hoped to help parents remember why these goals are important to them, and by placing the magnet frame on their refrigerator, we hoped families’ goals would be salient during daily decision-making about their nutrition.

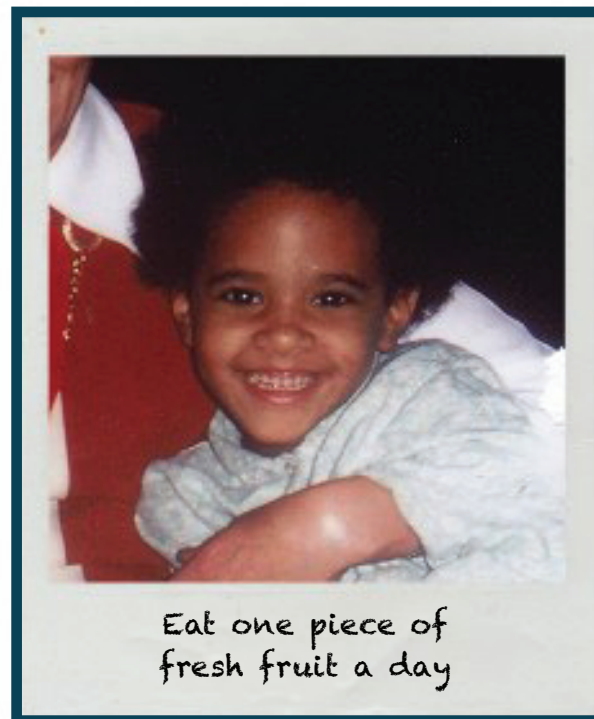


Figure 3: Photograph goal-setting tool

We implemented our goal-setting tool in the Texas WIC Port Arthur clinic. We planned to evaluate the impact of the goal-setting tool on participants and staff through qualitative interviews in Spring 2020, but unfortunately, we had to cancel the data collection because of COVID-19. However, we user tested the tool in November 2019 and found that it was well-received by participants.

***“Having a reminder is helpful because my husband had a stroke so it feels like I have 3 kids and it can get hard to keep track of things. It’s helpful to have this somewhere in the kitchen that reminds me of my goals every time I look at it.” —WIC Mom, Port Arthur Clinic***

## Lessons learned

Our results suggest that ambiguity and uncertainty around the appointment process matter, and can significantly affect participant experience. Providing a simple Roadmap for families and a toy to help keep children occupied and entertained can create slack and make it easier for participants to understand and follow the full WIC appointment process. The Roadmap and toy help set expectations, clarify the steps in the appointment, and endow progress, leading to a higher overall satisfaction with the WIC experience.

An additional lesson learned is that it is critical to be mindful of existing routines and procedures when creating designs to improve service delivery. Designs should not add extra hassle to already busy WIC staff. During our work with California WIC [we found](#) that new interventions can create hidden costs for staff. This is why we focused our efforts on integrating the designs into existing routines, while also trying to mitigate the burden on staff.

Lastly, we found that seemingly small interventions can lead to improvements in participant satisfaction, even when satisfaction is already high. The results from our Roadmap and toy intervention suggest that participants welcomed the reduction in uncertainty and had a better sense of what to expect from their appointment. While we did not formally evaluate the impact of our second design, feedback received during our user-testing and piloting suggested it was well-received by families. Both interventions are also easily scalable.

Families are already living in a context of uncertainty and [scarcity](#), so designs that create slack for staff and participants, reduce ambiguity, and eliminate hassles can be an effective way to improve the WIC experience, and, ultimately, improve program retention in the long-term.

You can find more details on the results and insights learned on [our website](#).