

WIC Authorization in King County Halal Stores: Benefits and Barriers

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Introduction

In 2014, OneAmerica began a collaborative partnership with Public Health – Seattle & King County in response to concerns raised by the Somali community relating to WIC vendor disqualification of several King County Halal grocery stores.

Additionally, the 2016 WA State Department of Health (DOH) report, *Opportunities to Improve WIC Services to Somali Women*, suggested that Somali WIC clients face linguistic and cultural barriers when shopping with WIC checks.

WIC vendor disqualification of Halal grocery stores in King County creates business development and economic concerns, as well as issues of health equity and food access.

WIC Program Overview

Eligibility:	Pregnant women, new and breastfeeding moms, children under 5; must meet household size and income criteria
Included in the WIC food package (administered at federal level):	Baby food, breakfast cereal, cheese, dried beans/peas/lentils, eggs, fish, produce, juice, milk, peanut butter, soy products, and whole grains
Other services provided:	Health screening, nutrition and health education, breastfeeding promotion and support, and navigation assistance for other programs
Vendor requirements (administered at state level):	Vendors must purchase WIC inventory items from bulk and wholesale retailers designated by the WA DOH, meet all inventory requirements, maintain a record-keeping system to facilitate auditing procedures, and more

Project Objectives

1. Assess the barriers that Somali grocers face in achieving and maintaining WIC authorization.
2. Assess Somali WIC clients' desire for WIC authorization in Somali stores and food purchasing preferences.
3. Assess the cultural and logistical barriers that WIC clients face when purchasing foods using WIC.
4. Substantiate the findings of the 2016 *Opportunities to Improve WIC Services to Somali Women* DOH report.

Methods

- Two surveys: Somali WIC clients and Halal store owners
- Both were translated into Somali
- Quantitative and qualitative fields
- Somali WIC client survey administered in:
 - WIC clinics - Columbia City, Renton, and Kent Birch Creek (n=21)
 - Halal stores (n=22)
- Halal store owner survey categories:
 - Stores with current WIC authorization (n=7)
 - Stores in the application process to accept WIC (n=3)
 - Stores that were disqualified from WIC (n=9)
 - Stores that have not applied for WIC authorization (n=28)

Key Findings

Somali WIC client survey:

- The most frequently reported concerns of Somali WIC clients when shopping with WIC checks are:
 - the lack of cultural appropriateness of some foods in the WIC package (baby food meats, 1% milk, cheese),
 - determining which products are Halal,
 - determining which products are included in the WIC package, and
 - experiencing tension or rude treatment by staff at larger chain stores.

Halal grocery store owner survey:

- The barriers to achieve and maintain WIC authorization most frequently reported by Halal store owners are:
 - confusion regarding the application process,
 - issues with record-keeping and auditing procedures,
 - unrealistic bulk and household inventory requirements for the store's size, and
 - purchasing requirements at DOH-approved wholesale outlets.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Increasing WIC authorization in King County Halal stores has the potential to provide Somali WIC clients with a culturally-relevant shopping place that addresses many of the linguistic and cultural barriers they face when redeeming WIC checks.

- DOH
 - Consider a tiered program for WIC vendor authorization.
 - Provide outreach and guidance for Halal stores to better explain which items are exempt from inventory requirements for religious and cultural reasons.
 - Provide technical assistance to support grocers in understanding application and re-authorization requirements and in establishing a comprehensive record-keeping system.
- Local Decision-makers, Public Health, OneAmerica and related organizations
 - Offer trainings on healthy food marketing strategies as well as healthy food purchasing and storage, provide posters/banners in English and Somali, and provide assistance to grocers in purchasing improved refrigeration equipment.
 - Conduct focus groups and interviews to gain more detailed insight into the barriers mentioned by Halal grocers

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