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# Food program for women and children won't allow home delivery; advocates call for change

Carolyn Said | April 29, 2020 | Updated: April 29, 2020 4 a.m.



Kenya Pierce holds 13-month-old Nyeri Rutherford as she helps her daughter Nairobi Banks, 7, with her math lesson, while son Dannon Lemon, 12, works on his computer. Pierce receives benefits from the Women, Infants and Children program.

Photo: Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

Ordering food online for home delivery is a lifeline for many during

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infants and children, have been required to personally shop at stores  
with their benefit cards, thus increasing their risks of contagion.

For CalFresh, that changed starting Tuesday, when California said recipients could order online for deliveries from Walmart and Amazon. The state had asked the federal government to expedite online purchasing so vulnerable people reliant on CalFresh — seniors, people with disabilities and others — could use delivery to avoid in-person interactions at stores. Scott Murray, a spokesman for the California Department of Social Services, said the state is working to bring other retailers on board as quickly as possible.

“It certainly makes it easier for us to do our part to keep ourselves and the community safe by remaining isolated,” said Richard Steenson, 56, a CalFresh recipient who is homeless and currently in isolation at a

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But it's still a mixed bag for him, Steenson noted. Soon he'll be moved to a homeless shelter at either Moscone West or the Multi-Service Center South. Delivery fees, which are not covered by CalFresh, are waived for orders over \$35, but that's "a lot to spend in one chunk when you don't have a fridge," he said via email. "Great for families but not tight-budgeted singles like me."

Meanwhile, the 1 million California residents who use WIC do not have the option of home delivery, even though they are lower-income people who often do not have cars but do have infants and small children, making it extra challenging to get to the store.



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“Online ordering would definitely help, especially now with the COVID-19 crisis,” said Kenya Pierce of Richmond, whose three children are 1, 7 and 12. “I really try to avoid going into stores and even taking my children out.”

Pierce, who works as a community services coordinator for a domestic violence program, buys online from Safeway and Target. During the pandemic crisis, she sometimes forgoes using her WIC benefits because she's reluctant to visit stores in person. But the \$70 a month in benefits, which pays for milk, fruits and vegetables, whole-grain breads, peanut butter, beans and canned salmon, is definitely helpful for her family's budget, she said. Her wife is home on disability leave from a warehouse job.

WIC benefits do not roll over from month to month, so unused benefits are forfeited.

Multiple states have requested waivers for online WIC ordering and delivery, said Melissa Cannon, senior advocate at California Food Policy Advocates, in an email. Her group and other advocates put out a [statement](#) this week highlighting why it's crucial to allow online ordering and delivery for WIC.

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Volunteers and staff with the San Francisco-Marin Food Bank work to organize and distribute food boxes in a drive-thru setting at their location in San Rafael, Calif. Saturday, April 11, 2020.

Video: Jessica Christian

WIC benefits are structured so recipients get a list of foods that they can choose from at participating stores, Cannon said. The lists are based on the age of a child and whether the mother is pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding. Monthly benefits average out to about \$44 per person in California.

The massive job losses engendered by shelter-in-place orders have plunged hundreds of thousands of Californians into desperate circumstances where food assistance is suddenly vital, as evidenced by huge lines at food banks.

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“In a moment of such crisis, with all of us focused on keeping our families safe — and fed — we need to make it as easy as possible for people to access nutritional food,” said Hilary Dockray, senior policy analyst with Alluma, a nonprofit social enterprise that provides technology and policy support for agencies that manage benefits programs, in the advocates’ statement. “WIC participants ... should have the same opportunity to purchase food online as everyone else in our state. ... These families face other challenges in accessing support, but this is one barrier that’s easily removed.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees WIC, said it does not have any pilots planned or occurring for online purchases. WIC covers only certain approved food, and by law all the purchases must occur in the presence of a cashier, it said. However, if stores offer online ordering only for WIC-approved items, participants could order online and then pick up and pay in person using their WIC card, it

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Kenya Pierce's son Dannon Lemon, 12, works on his computer at their Richmond home.

Photo: Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

But Cannon said large grocery stores are reluctant to allow curbside pickup for WIC recipients because of the concern about someone ordering and not paying.

The California Department of Public Health, which administers WIC for the state, did not reply to an email requesting comment.

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“We applaud the new availability of online shopping for (CalFresh) customers, but why would we not extend the same service to the women, infants, and children who rely on WIC?” said Jared Call, senior advocate at California Food Policy Advocates, in the statement. “Grocery delivery helps families avoid in-person interaction at stores and adhere to stay-at-home orders.”

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