

NCG Focuses on WIC

BY ALLIE MENTZER

National Co+op Grocers (NCG) has been focusing attention on the WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) program while the federal legislation that governs the program, the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act, is debated in Congress as part of its five-year reauthorization schedule. We are looking into ways to move the dial towards healthier food access by removing WIC requirements that are barriers to organic, bulk, and natural foods, and in the process, open the program up to allow greater co-op participation.

We know many co-ops would like to offer WIC in their communities but find the program requirements too restrictive or antithetical to other goals. For example, WIC retailers must stock specific brands that may contain ingredients that are incompatible with co-ops' product buying guidelines. While federal law ensures that WIC shoppers may purchase organic fruits and vegetables as part of the program, most state WIC programs expressly

prohibit other organic foods such as juice, peanut butter, milk, and eggs. In all but a handful of states, beans, grains, and cereals packaged in bulk are also prohibited from the WIC program, even though bulk goods tend to be less costly than packaged products.

Thank you to the many NCG co-ops who voluntarily completed a brief survey in February that helped us identify these and other barriers to WIC participation in their states.

NCG has hired Steve Etko to engage with key stakeholders in Washington, D.C., about WIC reforms. If Etko's name sounds familiar, that's because he is also the policy director for the National Organic Coalition, with whom we have partnered on Farm Bill reforms and other efforts to support organics. In early March, he and I met in Washington, D.C., with the National WIC Association and the Organic Trade Association and networked with other hunger advocacy groups at the National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, where we heard from congressional staffers about how to best

get our message through to lawmakers.

Given current political realities, we are sensitive to the fact that most groups will be trying to merely hang on to funding while the Child Nutrition Reauthorization Act is debated. NCG will work as closely as possible with these organizations to ensure that our desired outcomes do not work at cross purposes to maintaining funding levels or otherwise undermine the women, infants and children who rely upon the WIC program.

Our next steps include further developing relationships with potential long-term allies such as National WIC Association and writing comments to the Institute of Medicine, which makes recommendations that determine WIC food packages, about the merits of organic foods. We are also working with The Organic Center to provide relevant studies to support our comments.

Please direct questions about our WIC program work to NCG Advocacy Specialist Allie Mentzer, allie.mentzer@nccg.coop. ■

