

Government shutdown jeopardizes nutrition program for poor



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ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — Jacob Quick is a fat and happy 4-month-old with a big and expensive appetite. Like millions of other poor women, Jacob's mother relies on the federal Women, Infants and Children program to pay for infant formula — aid that is now jeopardized by the government shutdown.

Pennsylvania and other states say they can operate WIC at least through the end of October, easing fears among officials that it would run out of money within days. But advocates and others worry what will happen if the shutdown drags on beyond that.

"What's going to happen to my baby?" asked Jacob's mother, Cierra Schoeneberger, as she fed him a bottle of formula bought with her WIC voucher. "Am I going to have to feed him regular milk, or am I going to have to scrounge up the little bit of change I do have for formula or even baby food?"

WIC serves nearly 9 million mothers and young children, providing what advocates say is vital nutrition that poor families might otherwise be unable to afford.

Schoenberger, for example, said her son goes through about \$40 worth of formula a week. "It's like a car payment," said the unemployed mother of three.

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children — better known as WIC — supplies low-income women with checks or debit cards that can be used for infant formula and cereal, fruits and vegetables, dairy items and other healthy food. WIC also provides breast-feeding support and nutrition classes. Poor women with children under 5 are eligible.

Just before the shutdown, the U.S. Department of Agriculture had warned that states would run out of WIC cash after a "week or so." Now the agency says WIC should be able to provide benefits through late October, with states using \$100 million in federal contingency money released Wednesday and \$280 million in unspent funds from the last budget year.

If the aid dries up, desperate moms will probably dilute their babies' formula with water to make it last longer, or simply give them water or milk, said the Rev. Douglas A. Greenaway, head of the National WIC Association, an advocacy group. Pediatricians say children under 1 shouldn't drink cow's milk because they can develop iron deficiency anemia.

"These mothers have trust and confidence in this program, and that trust and confidence has been shaken by Congress," Greenaway said. "This is just unconscionable."

Danyelle Brents, 22, a single mother of three, receives about \$200 a month in vouchers for food and formula for her two children and baby. She is being hit doubly hard by the shutdown: She is a contract worker for the Federal Aviation Administration who catalogs records for aircraft certification, and is furloughed. Now, with her baby going through 10 cans of formula a month, she might lose key help with her grocery bill.

"That's a lot of money, \$15 a can," she said. "Now that I'm out of work, WIC is how I support my family. ... I'm scared at this point to go buy anything extra."

Groups that fight hunger say they are also concerned about the confusion that needy mothers may be feeling. Though most WIC offices are open, many mothers mistakenly assumed that benefits were cut off.

Advocates are also worried that there will be a cumulative effect as other, smaller government feeding programs run out of money.

Adding to the uncertainty: While USDA has said that food stamps are guaranteed to continue through October, it is unclear what will happen after that.

In Pennsylvania, whose \$208 million WIC program supports 250,000 women and children, all local WIC offices remain open and benefits are being dispensed as usual. The state Health Department said it has \$25.5 million on hand to continue operating the program through October. Ohio said it has enough money to last through the second week of November.

"Ohio WIC is open for business!" proclaimed the headline on a state website.

Utah's WIC program, though, immediately closed its doors Tuesday in the wake of the government shutdown, meaning that families who hadn't already received their October vouchers were out of luck and new applications couldn't be processed. The state got \$2.5 million in USDA funding on Thursday, and WIC offices throughout the state planned to reopen by noon Friday.

Charitable groups were already filling the void. A Facebook group called "The People's WIC — Utah" was launched hours after WIC offices closed, matching up families in need with those able to donate formula and other food.

In Layton, about 25 miles north of Salt Lake City, a donation drive was planned for Saturday, with organizers asking for fresh fruits and vegetables, unopened baby formula and other necessities.

Food banks, meanwhile, are bracing for a surge in requests for help if WIC runs out of money.

Linda Zimmerman, executive director of Neighbors In Need, which runs 11 food banks in Massachusetts, said her organization already provides a lot of baby formula to its clients, most of whom get WIC aid as well.

"I think they're truly nervous," Zimmerman said. "We're going to have to be doing a lot of work to make sure we can keep up with need for infant formula."

In some places, grocery stores refused to honor WIC vouchers, assuming they wouldn't get paid. Terry Bryce, director of Oklahoma's WIC program, said WIC officials called and emailed grocers to assure them the program is still funded.

In New Jersey, Patricia Jones said she is worried about losing her WIC assistance.

"You're affecting families that haven't done anything to you," said Jones, a 34-year-old mother of five. Because of the shutdown, she was turned away from the Social Security Administration

office in Newark when she tried to get printouts of her children's Social Security numbers to renew her welfare and WIC benefits.

Read more: <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/10/government-shutdown-nutrition-program-poor-97832.html#ixzz3KwoLOiP>