

July 25, 2022

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for your recent efforts to alleviate our nation's formula shortage by launching Operation Fly Formula. By July 24, this [operation](#) will have brought in over 61 million 8-ounce bottle equivalents of formula to help caregivers all across the country feed some of our nation's youngest and most vulnerable children. However, serious challenges remain for caregivers to physically access formula as well as afford escalating formula prices. These challenges are especially acute for those participating in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC program, and those living in low-income, rural, and underserved communities such as migrant farmworker families. No parent should have to worry about how to keep their child fed. As such, we request that you make specific accommodations, detailed below, to ensure that WIC participants and these communities are able to access and afford the formula they need to feed their children.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS), in [fiscal year 2020](#) 6.2 million participants were served each month by the WIC program, which included nearly 50 percent of all infants born in the United States. Many of these 6.2 million participants rely on the WIC program to cover formula expenses, which can total hundreds of dollars each month for one dependent. In fact, a [study](#) conducted by USDA ERS found that between 2004 and 2006, between 57 and 68 percent of all formula sold in the U.S. was purchased through the WIC program.

Currently, WIC purchases cannot be made online, meaning that participants can only use their benefits in brick and mortar stores. Usually, when store shelves are fully stocked with a full suite of formula options, this might not be a significant obstacle for program participants. However, at a time when store shelves are barren, offering only a few different options that might not meet the needs of the consumer, this can become a significant access barrier for WIC participants. As a result, many are forced choose between driving hours to find formula that can be purchased with WIC benefits or paying high out of pocket prices online. Indeed, reports have indicated that some formula flown in via Operation Fly Formula has been only available via online purchase,

excluding WIC participants from accessing the shipments and forcing them to compete with the general population to find formula on store shelves.

This crisis is impacting migrant farmworkers especially hard. Of WIC program participants, [as of 2018](#) nearly 30,000 were farmworker migrants. According to the Department of Labor National Agricultural Workers [Survey](#) from 2019-2020, one-third of all migrant farmworkers are women and one-half of all migrant farmworkers live with one or more minors. Many migrant farmworker mothers are unable to breastfeed their children for long periods of time, due to the nature of their work. As such, reliance on formula is high within those communities.

Like WIC participants, time and money are often in short supply for farmworkers to obtain formula. Additionally, farmworker migrants often do not participate in federal food assistance programs either due to ineligibility or fear of being denied green cards as a relic of the Trump administration's xenophobic "Public Charge" rule. Furthermore, language barriers often prevent farmworkers from knowing where and when they can access formula and can make them susceptible to scams. Migrant farmworkers keep our nation fed. They should not be forced to worry about how to keep their own families fed.

We appreciate the administration's recent announcement on steps that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is taking that will strengthen resiliency in WIC. These long-term improvements will help prepare us for any future crisis. However, the time required to implement these steps will likely outlast the current crisis. As such, to help alleviate the myriad barriers that these caregivers are immediately facing in order to feed our nation's children, we request the following:

1. Of the formula being flown in under Operation Fly Formula, a percentage be set aside specifically for brick and mortar WIC vendors as well as WIC pharmacies that are distributing specialty formulas.
2. That the formula set aside for WIC vendors and WIC pharmacies be distributed to brick and mortar establishments in low-income, rural, and underserved communities.
3. That USDA work with state WIC agencies to ensure that low-income, rural, and underserved communities are receiving formula supply from Operation Fly Formula.
4. That information about where and how to access said formula is provided in multiple languages to low-income, rural, and underserved communities and organizations that serve those communities.

Getting our physical and online store shelves restocked with formula during this nationwide shortage is of utmost importance. However, we cannot leave behind some of our most vulnerable community members. Taking these steps will help level the playing field and make progress on ensuring that everyone – no matter their income, language, profession, or location – has access to formula necessary to feed our nation's children.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mazie K. Hirono". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator