

Resource:

# Applying Behavioral Science to Improve WIC Outreach Messaging



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Behavioral science helps us understand how and why people choose and act (or fail to), while behavioral design gives us a method to apply that understanding and assess impact. This guide describes:

- How to effectively design messages for families, like WIC applicants, who face chronic scarcity of time, food, or money;
- Additional behavioral science strategies that can increase the effectiveness of messages; and
- Ways to engage participants and test messages before implementing them.

## Designing for Chronic Scarcity

When designing outreach for WIC, it is important to keep in mind that participants often lack key resources such as time, food, and money — which can make it even harder for them to complete the tasks necessary to enroll and stay on WIC. Even seemingly small hassles, like filling out an online form or processing complex, jargon-filled language, are intensified when someone is experiencing scarcity. Given that WIC-eligible families are scarce on money, time, and other resources, framing outreach messaging in a way that makes the follow-up action feel manageable, and engages participants in a dignity-affirming manner, is more likely to be effective.

Ideas42's Poverty Interrupted research provides an evidence-based framework for designing for the context of chronic scarcity by employing three key principles:

### Design Principle #1: Cut the Costs

Living in poverty is costly in many ways, including its added burdens on families' time, attention, and cognition. Many well intentioned programs increase costs unintentionally by adding hassles and complexity. Supporting families in a behaviorally informed way means identifying those costs and finding ways to reduce or eliminate them. In communications, this may look like keeping messages as short and simple as possible: simplifying language and ensuring it's readable, attending to accessibility needs, removing jargon, and automating processes in order to make it easier for families to take a particular action.

## **Design Principle #2: Create Slack**

Poverty is unforgiving, leaving no room for error or risk. Even minor unanticipated shocks (e.g., a child being sick) can create havoc and cause families to miss out on important resources (e.g., their certification appointment). Building a sufficient “cushion” within the design and delivery of messages is key to building slack for families. In the context of communications, giving families slack might look like ensuring they can easily reschedule when issues arise and sending multiple reminders to account for the fact that families may be busy and miss the first one.

## **Design Principle #3: Reframe and Empower**

Being poor carries a powerful social stigma that is often amplified by forces like racism. Many systems and programs reinforce the effects of racism, sexism, and classism and systematically disempower people rather than affirm their autonomy and dignity. Behaviorally informed communications have the power to mitigate or prevent those effects, both for service providers and beneficiaries. Examples include ensuring that communications are designed with language preferences in mind, highlighting the positive stories of people whom constituents can identify with, and whenever possible, testing and/or co-designing messages with families in your target audience. In addition, it is critical to understand what the commonly spoken languages are in your area. Through the data shared, you may be able to identify, at the individual or household level, what language each outreach recipient prefers for written outreach and for speaking.

## **More Ways to Inspire or Encourage Recipients to Take Action**

Behavioral science has been used to optimize public benefits programs and communications to improve access and engagement.<sup>1</sup> For instance, ideas42 worked with local WIC agencies to deploy behaviorally informed text message reminders to encourage appointment attendance.<sup>2</sup> Using behaviorally informed messages that were personalized, described the benefits of participation, clearly conveyed appointment dates and times, and clarified items participants needed to bring to appointments was found to be more successful than typical appointment messaging. In a related context, SNAP participants who received behaviorally informed recertification reminders were significantly more likely to recertify their benefits on time.<sup>3</sup> Those reminders emphasized the costs of inaction (i.e., people would lose their SNAP benefits), provided streamlined action steps, and asserted a clear deadline.

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<sup>1</sup> For a checklist of ways to make sure your message is understood, see <https://www.bhub.org/best-practice/letters-and-email/>.

<sup>2</sup> See [https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/I42-1225\\_CA-WIC-Paper\\_May1-2.pdf](https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/I42-1225_CA-WIC-Paper_May1-2.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BDT\\_Playbook\\_FINAL-digital.pdf](https://www.ideas42.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/BDT_Playbook_FINAL-digital.pdf), pages 28-35.

Two behavioral science strategies that any state can apply when developing messaging are:

### **Emphasize the Cost of Inaction (And Benefit of Action)**

It's not always clear to recipients of a communication what the implications are if they do not take a particular action, or the benefits if they follow through. Making those costs and benefits stand out in a communication is helpful for motivating behavior. Emphasizing the costs of inaction has been shown to be particularly powerful and may look like "Don't miss out on a year's worth of WIC" or being clear about a family's potential dollar loss. For example, ideas42 redesigned a SNAP recertification reminder to include the language "Don't lose your SNAP benefits," which was found to be effective.<sup>4</sup> Language such as "Don't miss out on another year's worth of free healthy food and expert support!" was also found to be an effective framing that resonated with current participants around their certification appointment. Language that focuses on highlighting benefits can be helpful but should be as specific as possible. For example, "Upload these documents TODAY to save time in person at the clinic tomorrow!" is specific and clear enough to make the benefits of action salient.

#### ***Example: Colorado***

*The Colorado WIC pilot conducted in partnership with BDT and CBPP in 2018 suggests including dollar values in outreach text messages may increase response rates.<sup>5</sup> The evaluation showed an uptick in responses after a message mentioned a dollar figure for the value of WIC food benefits. This was particularly notable because it was the third attempt to reach adjunctively eligible Coloradans; the first two outreach messages focused on the health and nutrition benefits of WIC. Response rates usually decline progressively with each additional message, so the reversal of this trend suggests that the dollar figure may have been a particularly salient messaging feature.*

*However, it is important to note that the pilot was not designed to conduct formal message tests. Testing the effectiveness of different message content — in addition to the number, order, and timing of messages — is ripe for further exploration.*

### **Setting Meaningful Deadlines**

When you ask someone to complete an action, it may be appropriate and helpful to set a deadline for them to complete it. It's not enough to just set a deadline for a particular action. Deadlines need to be carefully thought about and messaged appropriately. A few helpful tips:

- If deadlines are necessary, the design of communications should ensure that any deadlines are salient visually and that reminders are provided leading up to any deadlines.
- When creating a deadline for taking an action, it's important that the deadline feel urgent but also possible.
- If asking someone to complete a larger task, think about creating intermediate deadlines to break up the larger task into smaller ones.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See [www.cbpp.org/wicpilotreport](http://www.cbpp.org/wicpilotreport)

## Testing Messages and Engaging WIC Participants

If it is within your capacity, testing messages before launching them can help ensure they resonate with participants and are effective overall and with specific groups. Various populations may respond differently to outreach messaging and approaches. For example, the WIC pilots Montana conducted in partnership with BDT and CBPP had different results than the three other states that conducted similar pilots. Montana recipients did not respond as strongly to texts, even those including dollar figures, and subsequent attempts after the first outreach text elicited very few responses. Message testing can help your team better understand how to effectively tailor outreach to different populations.

Different kinds of tests require different levels of resources and serve different purposes:

### Usability Tests

Feedback from participants with lived experience is the most important source of information in making your communications effective. Known also as “user testing,” usability tests are helpful for getting rapid feedback on a particular communication design. Usability tests are useful for understanding why something in a communication potentially resonates, but they won’t tell you if someone will actually follow up.

Usability tests can typically be done quickly and easily in partnership with local WIC sites and are standard practice before rolling out a particular communication. They also provide an opportunity for WIC staff to engage in some co-design work. Asking WIC participants questions such as “How might you change this communication to make it more helpful to WIC participants?” creates a moment for WIC participants to engage in creating messages that will resonate with others; it also can be a rich source of feedback for designers.

### A/B Tests

This type of test is helpful when trying to understand which version of a particular communication leads people to take the action that is being asked of them.<sup>6</sup> For example, you may already have a communication in use that you want to test against a redesigned version that you suspect may be more effective. A/B tests can also be helpful when testing different tones or framing of a particular communication. Showing people different versions of a communication and asking them which one resonates best is a basic version of A/B testing; more advanced versions include randomized controlled trials that randomly select people to receive different communications and then measure the effect on their behavior (e.g., whether they attend an appointment, enroll, redeem benefits, etc.). A/B testing that includes randomized controlled trials often involves collecting administrative data to understand the impact of the communication (and to select people to receive the messages at the start), which can be time intensive and costly for states to implement.

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<sup>6</sup> See [Overview: What can A/B testing offer me?](https://abtesting.ideas42.org/overview/), ideas42, <https://abtesting.ideas42.org/overview/>

## **Pilot Tests**

Pilot testing involves rolling out a communication to a subset of the population and observing what outcomes result before scaling it to everyone else. It may be useful when agencies want to refine a campaign or communication before scaling it up, or when they want to test a design with a specific subpopulation. Ideas42's work has included pilot testing messages at two different WIC clinics in California. Like A/B testing via randomized controlled trials, pilot testing often involves collecting administrative data to understand the impact of the communication (and to select people to receive the messages at the start); thus, it may be more costly for WIC agencies to deploy. Still, pilot testing is a worthy investment for states looking to understand the impact of a particular communication on outcomes and can be useful in seeing whether the communication had different effects for different subgroups.

## **Testing While Scaling**

Another way to measure the effect of changes in communication could be to phase in the rollout of a new communication over time and location. Evaluating the results in the areas where implementation occurs earlier allows the areas where implementation occurs later to serve as controls. The areas you choose for earlier and later implementation should be as similar as possible to one another to help ensure that the results reflect the impact of the intervention rather than differences in the populations you are comparing. This approach can be useful to estimate effects at a larger scale and to confirm the results from the earlier test types described above. This type of test is particularly useful if, for administrative or budgetary reasons, a change cannot be enacted all at once and so requires that some sites or counties begin earlier than others.