



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**FURLOUGHS WORSEN COMPUTER MELTDOWN
IN FOOD PROGRAM FOR POOR MOTHERS**

Sacramento. A computer crash shut down statewide WIC nutrition services to thousands of hungry families for most of last Friday, but furloughs imposed by the Governor last Spring meant that the California Department of Public Health was unable to promptly identify and fix the problem, and nobody was around all day to communicate to frontline providers about their lack of progress.

“We’ve always been assured that these personnel cuts would not impact direct services to the vulnerable population we serve. Well, they just did -- big time,” said Laurie True, Executive Director of California WIC Association. “It is unacceptable that 35,000 participants were sent home hungry for four days and nobody was around to deal with the crisis because they’ve been furloughed.”

The WIC problems started at 10:15 AM on Friday, October 9, and were unresolved by the day’s end. The lack of information coming from Sacramento created waits of up to five hours, as providers hoped the system would come on line again so they could issue benefit checks. In the end, local staff sent mothers home without the checks they needed to purchase critically needed “new healthier WIC foods for their-children. Most will come back tomorrow, unable to wait for the postal service, delayed by the Columbus Day holiday, to deliver their benefits by mail later in the week.

“Mothers come in needing breastfeeding support or formula for their newborns. They need the food WIC provides right away and don’t have the money to buy it. It was very, very hard,” said Gloria Pecina, WIC Director for United Health Centers, a community health center serving farm workers in Fresno and Tulare counties.

The State WIC Division estimates that 35,000 WIC participants did not get their food benefits on Friday because of the computer shutdown, an unusually high number due to the recent transition to new healthier food benefits. All 650 local WIC offices, as well as over 4,700 grocery stores who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program were impacted by computer shutdown, which originated at the Office of Technology Data Center in Sacramento, and resulted in a statewide outage for all computer systems operated by that center. In one Los Angeles program, over 8,000 WIC participants went without on Friday.

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On Monday, calling the situation “devastating and critical,” Linnea Sallack, Chief of the WIC Division, California Department of Public Health, sent an email apology to frontline WIC staff. “This outage could not have occurred at a worse time. Undoubtedly, thousands of participants were sent away from your offices empty-handed and it will be incredibly difficult for you to get them served since your schedules are already overwhelming.” Sallack promised to find out what happened and why.

Despite the fact that every penny of the funds used to operate the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) comes from the federal government, the Governor’s Executive Order implementing state employee furloughs included all but six of the Program’s 250 technical staff. So when local WIC providers jammed state phone lines asking what to do to assist mothers who needed basic WIC foods like milk, infant formula, fresh produce, eggs and cereal over the long holiday weekend, they couldn’t get through to the skeleton crew answering the phones. Even if they had, nobody knew what the problem was because most state computer operators were also furloughed.

“The WIC program is completely and totally federally funded, so staff cutbacks don’t do anything to help the state solve its budget mess. All state WIC employees should be on deck every day to ensure that millions of moms get the food and education they need to have healthy children. If the Governor won’t exempt WIC from furloughs, the Legislature should do it,” said True.

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