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Kaua'i selected as pilot site for WIC transition from paper checks to electronic benefits transfer

eWIC provides a fast, flexible and simple way to pay for groceries

LĪHU'E, KAUĀ'I — The Hawai'i Department of Health's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, is making access to healthy food more convenient to ensure children have a healthy start in life.

On Tuesday, Oct. 29, WIC will launch on Kaua'i eWIC, an electronic benefits transfer card, which is used like a debit card and replaces paper checks for qualified families to purchase approved foods in retail grocery stores. On Kaua'i, about 1,000 WIC participants use a cumulative total of about \$31,000 in benefits on an average month.

"Minimizing barriers to access nutritious food is essential in helping families and communities become healthier in Hawai'i," said Gov. David Ige. "WIC's conversion from checks to cards is an important step in lowering those barriers and achieving equity for families experiencing food insecurity on Kaua'i and eventually the entire state."

eWIC will eventually be implemented statewide, with a targeted rollout for O'ahu in March 2020, followed by Maui County in April and Hawai'i Island in May.

"This latest upgrade to our system will take the shopping experience for our families to a new, exciting level," said Melanie Murakami, the Department of Health's WIC Services Branch chief. "This new technology allows us to better serve families and makes transactions at cash registers much more efficient for both shoppers and retailers."

With paper checks, participants are required to spend the entire amount of their allocation in one singular transaction. With the eWIC card, which automatically tracks purchases and the remaining balance for a 30-day rolling amount, participants can buy as little or as much WIC approved groceries as they need at a time.

WIC participants may only purchase groceries from a WIC-approved food list. This list is comprised of nutrient-dense foods that are essential during pregnancy, lactation, between pregnancies, and early childhood with consideration for local food preferences. This pilot coincides with the implementation of the newly improved WIC-approved food list.

"WIC participants are now able to purchase poi, applesauce, and many new organic options, including organic baby food, soymilk, tofu, and whole wheat pasta," said Michael Ellis, Hawai'i WIC vendor manager. "We can also offer several new convenience foods, including string cheese, canned beans, and canned fruits and vegetables."

The WIC program is similar to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which evolved from the food stamps program. WIC is a federal government program that is administered in Hawai'i by the Department of Health. The program provides supplemental food assistance and nutrition education specifically for low-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, as well as infants and children up to age five to ensure they have a healthy start in life. WIC also provides referrals to other community-based services.

Kaua'i participants will be converted to the eWIC card over a three-month period, depending upon when their benefits were last issued. New WIC participants can apply at the clinic nearest them: WIC's main office at 4370 Kukui Grove Street, Suite 3-213, in Līhu'e or the Hanapepe satellite office at the Hanapepe Health Center, 1-3756 Kamualii Highway. The Kapa'a satellite office is temporarily closed for renovation. For more information, call the WIC office at (808) 241-3080 or visit the Hawai'i Department of Health's website at <https://health.hawaii.gov/wic/>

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