

NWA IT Conference: The Future of WIC is Now

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Delteck attended the 2011 National Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Association's (NWA) Technology Conference September 21-23, in Pittsburgh, Pa. For those not familiar with the conference, it's held every two years and provides an opportunity to network, learn, and share technological directions for WIC's future with industry leaders. Topics this year included WIC management information system (WIC MIS) enhancements; improving WIC service delivery; the latest information on electronic benefit transfer (EBT) technology; and quality data collection and information security.

After attending the Medicaid management information system (MMIS) [Conference](#) earlier this year, and as an analyst researching health care reform, health insurance exchanges (HIXs) and health information exchanges (HIEs) on a daily basis, I was surprised and somewhat critical of the dire picture the WIC program painted itself in at the NWA IT Conference. Many of the presentations surrounded the new WIC EBT mandate for 2020 and how states are struggling to juggle requirements to implement in time. I wondered how they could say all of this knowing that next door in the Departments of Health and Insurance, they have to implement brand new HIXs, eligibility systems, and MMIS upgrades by 2014. Those departments would be overjoyed if they could add another six years to the development process. Another issue I had was that each state already has EBT technology employed through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To me, this means the technology already exists, and shouldn't be a foreign concept to WIC programs.

With these misconceptions swirling, I have to say it was a great idea that I stayed to learn more about the WIC program. Reverend Douglas Greenaway, president and chief executive officer of the NWA, opened the conference by saying that 53 percent of children born in America are on the WIC program. As the joint select committee looks to slash the federal budget, WIC has moved off of the protected list and is currently on the negotiating table. Current funding for the program is not enough to handle all of the applicants who need assistance. Caseloads are continuing to rise and food inflation is currently at 6 percent.

WIC EBT will help drive down costs and fraud, but as I learned at several sessions, it will be a challenge to implement. Like with early innovators in the HIX arena, states will look to benefit from those that have already blazed the trail. Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) estimates that 50 percent of all state agencies are working to implement EBT, with 40 states currently in the planning phase. Seven agencies are in the implementation phase, while 10 currently have statewide WIC EBT. Since WIC EBT is tied closely with not only the state, but retailers, it will be interesting to see the types of integration that will occur as agencies choose online or offline systems, especially those states that have grocery store chains spanning borders. WIC EBT systems are much more technical than those employed by the SNAP program because cards and retailer machines must determine which foods are eligible (sometimes weekly) and the balance left to the card owner.

Delteck is tracking many WIC EBT projects in our database and issued a [report](#) last year providing background information on the WIC vertical. An analyst recap of the conference is in the works and will be posted shortly. As always, don't forget to follow the Health Care and Social Services team on Twitter [@GovWin_HHS](#) or connect with us through [LinkedIn](#).