

Elevating Vermont WIC's program through data: VITLAccess provides insights needed to better serve families

Streamlined access to key data saves time for staff members and keeps families enrolled in program services

CHALLENGES FOR VERMONT WIC

- Significant time spent reaching out to providers and/or participants to track down measurement and hematologic data to complete required WIC health assessments
- Duplication of blood testing for WIC participants
- Difficulty keeping participants connected to the program due to in-person-only appointments
- Staff had limited access to current anthropometric and hematological data during COVID, which made completing a full nutrition assessment difficult. Measurements were not required for enrollment during the public health emergency due to regulatory waivers in place at the time.

SOLUTION

Using VITLAccess, VITL's secure, web-based clinical portal, to enable Vermont WIC's authorized users to view and apply the data needed to complete the nutrition assessment

RESULTS

- Streamlined insights based on the specific health data needed to conduct and complete mandatory participant health assessments
- With patient data via VITL, Vermont WIC can continue conducting health assessments remotely, keeping families actively enrolled in the WIC program and providing quality nutrition services.
- Vermont WIC staff saved time not having to manually track down measurement data from providers and participants, giving time back to focus on the needs of the families

VITLACCESS BY THE NUMBERS

- Remote appointments have better adherence rates compared to in-person appointments. Having access to clinical data allows WIC staff to conduct a full nutrition and health assessment, while offering a remote appointment option, which many families are more likely to attend.
- The majority of Vermont WIC staff found that by using VITLAccess, they were able to successfully access pertinent patient data.

CASE STUDY

- The majority of Vermont WIC staff are able to get the information they need in less than five minutes using VITLAccess.
- Over half of Vermont WIC staff use VITLAccess to collect data at most or every appointment.
- **52** Vermont WIC staff members use VITLAccess in their work.
- WIC averages 1,362 chart accesses per month and had **8,171** chart accesses over a six-month period.

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF VERMONT FAMILIES WITH EARLY INTERVENTION

Celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is the premier [public health nutrition program](#) for pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding/ chestfeeding people, infants, and children in the United States. The WIC program helps pregnant, breastfeeding and chestfeeding people, infants, and children up to age five enjoy healthier lives through nutrition, education, and support. Vermont's WIC program serves approximately 11,000 participants across the state.

The four main pillars of the WIC program include a monthly food benefit, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals to health and community resources. WIC foods supplement participants' dietary needs with particular emphasis on foods that include nutrients needed in times of rapid growth and development. WIC nutrition staff provide one-on-one nutrition counseling and group classes, virtual classes, and online nutrition education offerings based on what participants are interested in. Breastfeeding support includes International Board Certified Lactation Consultants and breastfeeding peer counselors who help participants to reach their infant feeding goals.

Health care referrals are another significant part of Vermont WIC's program. Staff members refer participants to healthcare and community

providers to fulfill any additional services and support needed. This care includes dental and primary care referrals, childcare, or other benefit assistance programs.

STATE HEALTH INFORMATION EXCHANGE MAKES IT EASIER FOR VERMONT WIC TO ACCESS ESSENTIAL HEALTH DATA MANDATORY FOR PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Vermont WIC and VITL, Vermont's health data sharing network, have been partnering for more than a year. The collaboration between Vermont WIC and VITL was initially made possible by changes in WIC procedures and policies due to COVID. The partnership was extended when its value became clear and showed there was a better way to serve program participants during the pandemic and after. A requirement of the WIC program is that participants are seen in person annually so that a WIC staff member can collect measurement data such as height, weight, head circumference for infants, and blood iron levels. This data is used to conduct health assessments during clinic appointments to evaluate growth and development and look for any nutritional risk that might be happening during pregnancy or early childhood. With this information, Vermont WIC staff members can identify health concerns and work with healthcare providers to help address them, leading to more positive health outcomes.

CASE STUDY

During the pandemic, mandatory in-person visits were waived, and as a result, Vermont WIC wasn't able to collect important measurement data, making it difficult to conduct thorough health assessments. Staff were able to use data from participants' medical providers to meet this need, but collecting that data often required many phone calls and faxes, which was time-consuming and burdensome for both WIC staff and healthcare practice staff.

Vermont WIC, a program of the State Department of Health, was aware that other public health programs were able to access the data through VITL to achieve public health aims, such as conducting infectious disease case investigations. With this understanding, the program explored how technology might help. Partnering with VITL helped fill the data gap that was growing, providing the specific information Vermont WIC staff needed to complete the health assessments for families participating in the program. This includes using VITLAccess, a secure web-based clinical portal that gives authorized users the ability to review patient data shared by participating healthcare organizations across Vermont. This portal includes data contributed by the pediatricians and family medicine practitioners who provide care for WIC participants.

"Developing the clinical access for our staff to be able to log into VITL's data network and have access to those few key pieces of information that we need to conduct our health assessments was a really great connection for us," says Amy Malinowski, RD, Assistant Director for WIC Evaluation and Quality Improvement, Vermont Department of Health.

WIC and VITL are currently exploring a potential project to deliver the specific data needed by the WIC program directly into WIC's health record data system, bypassing the need

to search for data in a separate system and making access to important clinical data even more efficient. For WIC staff, less time spent on data collection means more time available to focus on the needs of participating families.

TECHNOLOGY HELPS VERMONT WIC REMOVE BARRIERS TO CARE

Many of the families currently participating in the Vermont WIC program joined the program during COVID when all appointments were remote, primarily by phone. As the public health emergency ended, Vermont WIC opted into a waiver that allowed them to continue to offer remote visits to families (in addition to in-person) if that worked better for the participant, as long as they had the requisite measurement data on file.

"Having the flexibility with the waivers has been helpful when we can get measurements from places like VITL," says Amy. Having access to the measurement data using VITLAccess also means Vermont WIC staff don't have to ask the provider directly via fax or another method, so it's also less work for the provider to not have to compile the information and send it to the WIC office.

"We're in a new place where the data we're getting from VITL is not only helping us conduct thorough health assessments, but it's also keeping families certified and actively enrolled in the WIC program if they have a hardship that prevents them from coming into the office to do an in-person visit," Amy explains.

“We can get the information in VITL and still connect with the family over the phone, meet all of our program requirements, conduct health assessments, and keep families in the program.”

Even if a participant chooses to come in person for their appointment, if Vermont WIC already has their measurement data from providers via VITLAccess, the participant doesn't have to get measured again or undergo another blood test or finger prick test, reducing duplication for everyone.

“There have been situations where we have scheduled an in-person appointment for a family to come in and they need to reschedule,” explains Amy. “We can access the measurement data using VITLAccess and have it within the system, within the timeframe that we need, and switch the family to a phone appointment, easing the burden on the family having to come in, and they can still stay active with the program.”

DATA HELPS VERMONT WIC SERVE FAMILIES BETTER

Having accurate, current data for remote appointments makes participant health assessments more accurate and allows Vermont WIC staff to focus on the needs of the family. It also gives Vermont WIC participants more options to stay connected to the program, which helps many families across the state.

The pandemic revealed for many healthcare organizations new opportunities to better serve people and support staff. In this case, by partnering with their state's health information exchange, Vermont WIC has supported good outcomes for pregnant and postpartum people, infants, and children.

About VITL

VITL is a nonprofit organization that supports the advancement of health care delivery and reform in Vermont through the aggregation and exchange of health information. Founded in 2005, VITL is the legislatively designated operator of the Vermont Health Information Exchange. VITL's vision is to be a leader in collaboratively delivering actionable data that leads to better health. Learn more about VITL's work at www.vitl.net.

About Vermont WIC

WIC is the USDA Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. WIC provides food benefits, nutrition education, breastfeeding support, and referrals for pregnant Vermonters, new parents, and children under five. For more information please visit www.healthvermont.gov/wic.