

Possible cuts worry recipients of WIC

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By **Tarryl Jackson | Jackson Citizen Patriot**

Jessica Elliott's refrigerator would have been completely empty at times if not for a federal program that helps feed her family.

The mother of three biological children and three stepchildren participates in the Women, Infants and Children program, which provides free foods like fruits, vegetables and whole-grain breads for families in need.

Elliott runs a day care out of her home, and her husband Dennis works at TAC Manufacturing. Still, the Spring Arbor Township resident said supporting her family can be challenging.

"Without WIC, I couldn't keep my head above water," Elliott said. "WIC is very crucial for our family."

WIC itself could be in for some challenges. Some in Congress have pushed to reduce its funding, with the U.S. House approving a 13 percent cut in June. No budget cuts have been approved by the Senate.

Such a cut could mean less food for local clients or a reduction in how many people the program can serve, said Stefanie Horning, WIC coordinator for Jackson County.

The program helps more than 5,000 low-income mothers and their children locally every month.

"It will have a huge impact," she said. "We don't know what yet. It just depends on what happens."

WIC is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the Michigan Department of Community Health. Local agencies, such as health departments and nonprofits, provide WIC services to the public.

WIC started in the early 1970s to help prevent malnutrition in low-income mothers and children up to age 5. It provides food and nutrition education, and makes medical referrals based on health screenings and assessments.

"We're trying to help people break the cycle and keep their families healthy, and make sure the children in our county have a healthy future," Horning said.

Clients, who generally qualify based on income and whether they are considered at risk of poor nutrition, can receive anywhere from \$60 to \$400 a month in WIC benefits, Horning said.

That aid can supplement food stamps.

Women and children can receive only nutritious foods like milk, cheese, eggs, juice, cereals and beans. They can spend the money at WIC-authorized stores, such as grocery stores and supermarkets.

Dietitians through the program provide high-risk nutrition counseling for participants with special medical conditions or nutrition-related health issues.

"That's what makes us different from food stamps," Horning said. "We're actually educating people on nutrition."

Mary Cunningham-Deluca, director of children's programs at the Community Action Agency in Jackson, said the majority of its Head Start and Early Head Start families receive WIC benefits.

Her agency partners with the WIC office with making sure families receive different health assessments, like lead screenings and hemoglobin checks.

"If (WIC is) reduced, they are not going to be able to get baby formula and food for their children," Cunningham-Deluca said.

Every WIC dollar spent on a pregnant woman saves more than \$3.50 in federal, state, local and private health care costs, according to the state Department of Community Health.

U.S. Rep Tim Walberg, R-Tipton, said he has consistently voted for reasonable cuts to all areas of the federal budget that have come before him. He voted in favor of the bill last month to cut WIC funding nationally by \$868 million.

"With a \$14 trillion debt and growing every day, all areas of the budget must be on the table for review to ensure the highest degree of efficiency and effectiveness," Walberg said in a statement.

"While preserving the overall integrity of the WIC program, my vote on the underlying agriculture appropriations bill cut unnecessary spending across many programs."

Horning and others, however, say WIC provides assistance that other agencies do not.

Elliott said it covers several topics through its nutrition education program, including infant and toddler feeding, anemia or iron deficiency, and child growth and development.

"They cover just about everything you need to keep your family healthy," she said.

Even if the government were to do away with

WIC and put more money into food stamps, that nutrition education and counseling would be lost, Horning said.

"It will definitely hurt our children, and that's the place we need to be focusing on," she said.