

This can not happen. It is intolerable.

I witnessed a very unsettling and disturbing thing on the 3rd of December.

I was standing in line at a local grocery store, with just two small items to purchase, and a man in front of me, with a little girl probably two years old in the seat of his grocery cart, was experiencing some delay in making his purchase. There was a quiet conversation going on between the cashier and the guy and I didn't want to appear to be eavesdropping, so I backed away and looked at products on the end cap behind us.

While waiting the minute or so, the little girl was looking adorable and was probably very happy to be out grocery shopping with her Daddy. The items being purchased were a gallon of milk and two boxes of cereal.

After a bit, the cashier took the three items and put them on the unused line behind her, and the guy apologized for the problem.

Having been separated by enough distance that I couldn't hear the conversation, I wasn't sure what had transpired, I thought it might have been an issue with his check offered for the purchase.

The fellow and his little girl departed the store.

As the cashier was ringing up my modest purchase, a couple other women employees approached. One appeared to be a supervisor. At that point, the cashier said something to the effect that she couldn't ring up a WIC transaction. The supervisor-type said, "Oh, we haven't been able to do WIC for three days."

Now, I, as I'm sure a lot of my readers, have stood in a grocery store line behind someone making a purchase of 12-pack after 12-pack of soft drinks WITH FOOD STAMPS! Here was a guy trying to buy milk and cereal, probably for his little girl in the basket of the cart, and he couldn't because the DAMNED system was down.

To say I was upset would be an understatement.

But there was more.

The cashier, who knew nothing about a WIC problem at 11:00 am on the Monday morning after the first of the month - when the WIC accounts are recharged for the month - asked if a sign had been posted that there was a problem (so customers could avoid any embarrassment of trying to make a purchase of allowed products, only to be told "no" for reasons unknown to them or the cashier) and she was told "no," there hadn't been a warning posted.

The cashier, thinking the problem was unique to her store, told the supervisor she had recommended the guy go to Wal-Mart to make his purchase. Why Wal-Mart? Just to get rid of a problem?

I was not only upset about the fact that this critical nutritional program was unavailable to eligible families, but I was just

as upset that I hadn't heard the exchange so I could have offered to loan the guy \$10 or pay for the milk and cereal - maybe \$7-\$8 total.

And, I, probably more than anyone, have a responsibility to ferret out government ineptness along with corruption and other failings.

As far as I could determine at the time, no one from that grocery store (a major one in town) had contacted the Cheyenne WIC office to inform them of the problem. For three days, they just sent eligible parents out the door - or, those parents might have been able to shell out the cash for the purchase - but either the breakdowns are so common that it isn't any big deal to the store, or they haven't been able to expedite the correction in the past and have decided things just have to take their natural course - to go without until the WIC program would once again be accessible.

There may be readers who think that anyone on food stamps or WIC are not entitled to normal courtesies or proper program administration. I disagree.

At Econo-Foods, they seemed to have frequent problems taking food stamps (PayWest). I remember standing in line one day, about three or four back from the cashier, and hearing that cashier telling the person in front of her that the "computers were down" and asking, in a very loud voice, "Is there anyone here who is not making a purchase with PayWest?"

There may be some, down on their luck at the time, who would not appreciate a public announcement that they are making grocery purchases with food stamps. I thought it rude and I'm not big on labels.

I also don't understand how one using food stamps can purchase cases of soft drinks but cannot buy deli chicken. I've seen more than one person in line have the deli chicken taken because it is a "prepared food" but leave the store with 12-packs of Mountain Dew. Where is the wisdom in that policy? Raw chicken is okay - cooked chicken is not.

After the episode on the 3rd, I went directly to my office, where I had a phone book. I called the WIC office and spoke with the administrator of the program. She was unaware that there was a problem. She said she would call the store in question and I asked that she call me back with the resolution because I would be writing about the incident.

She did - by the close of business the same day.

The explanation didn't provide much cover for either the store or the program.

What is the WIC Program?

It is described as: "A Food and Nutrition Service program to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods."

Eligibility is limited to pregnant women (during term and up to six weeks after birth or the end of the pregnancy, up to six months after the birth or end of the pregnancy and breast-feeding mothers up to the infant's first birthday). Infants up to their first birthday. And children up to their fifth birthday.

A July 1, 2006 brochure spells out the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Program in detail and it is an exacting program, indeed.

In bold letters, on the front of the brochure, it reads: "**ONLY WIC participant(s) should eat the foods purchased with WIC benefits.**"

When you read above for whom this Program is tailored, you can better understand why an eligible participant not being able to buy milk is just intolerable.

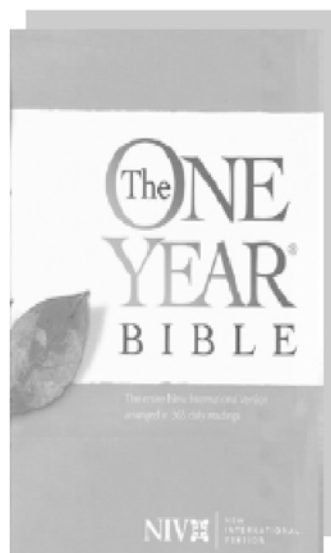
There are seven pages of specifics about what can and what cannot be accessed through WIC entitlement. Whole milk is recommended for children 1 to 2 years old.

But flavored milk **cannot** be bought. Eggs, Grade A or AA can be bought - brown eggs and cage-free eggs **cannot**.

Peanut butter can be bought - peanut butter with added jelly or honey **cannot**. Most breakfast cereals can be bought but not in the single serve packets. Pure juice can be bought - juices with sugar, NutraSweet **cannot**. Full-strength 100% vegetable juice in 46 oz. cans are approved but **STORE BRAND ONLY!**

This is a valuable program. Keep it operational. Whoever is responsible, do your job. Please do your job.

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