



Unwinding the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Effects on Health Care and Nutrition Programs

Summary

In March 2020, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) declared a public health emergency for COVID-19. That declaration has since been extended multiple times in 90-day increments. Temporary policies put in place by federal legislation affecting members of BadgerCare Plus, Wisconsin Medicaid programs, and FoodShare, are tied to that declaration. These programs help people with low income get the health care and nutrition they need. The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) manages these programs.

When the federal government ends the COVID-19 public health emergency, states must begin a process of phasing out (or unwinding) the temporary policies. The term unwinding is used by the federal government to describe the steps states must take to end temporary policies and re-establish regular eligibility, enrollment, and benefits management processes after the federal government ends its COVID-19 public health emergency.

The federal government will notify states at least 60 days before the end date of the declaration. At that time, DHS will begin to notify members about changes and tell them when and how they need to update their information to continue participating in the benefit program. As part of the regular enrollment process, a member must renew their benefits every year. Members will receive a letter a month before their benefits end that tells them how to renew. Under federal rules, states may not end Medicaid coverage for individuals or families without first verifying their information and eligibility for the program. Like most states, Wisconsin will distribute and conduct its member renewals over 12 months and DHS will also phase out other policies connected to the public health emergency declaration.

Preparing for Change

DHS has undertaken significant efforts to prepare for and support unwinding, whenever it happens. This includes developing policy based on federal guidance, making system updates, crafting messaging for members, adopting new ways of reaching members (via text and email), coordinating with partners, and adding capacity for income maintenance agencies.

Information is available on the DHS website for members of BadgerCare Plus, Wisconsin Medicaid, and FoodShare programs. A partner toolkit is also available that provides materials and messaging to help partner organizations and stakeholder groups get the word out on the following key themes:

- Members of BadgerCare Plus and Wisconsin Medicaid programs still have health care coverage.

- DHS will share information with members about any upcoming changes and actions they need to take.
- Members should not renew coverage until they get their 45-day renewal notice. There is no benefit to members in renewing before their planned renewal date. They will keep their coverage until their renewal. Renewals have been distributed evenly to manage workload for income maintenance agencies across the state.
- The most important thing members can do right now is keep their contact information (address, phone number, email) up to date so DHS can reach them with important information when changes begin. Members can update their information online using the ACCESS website, through the MyACCESS mobile app, or by calling the county or tribal agency that manages their benefits.

Impact

The table below identifies who is impacted by these changes and what will be changing for them.

Who	What
<p>All members of BadgerCare Plus and Wisconsin Medicaid programs</p> <p>Current enrollment data can be found at https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/badgercareplus/enrolldata.htm</p>	<p>All members will need to complete a renewal. If the member is found to be no longer eligible for BadgerCare Plus or their Wisconsin Medicaid program, the member will need to transition to another form of coverage.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DHS will refer members to other resources to help them find new coverage. • This includes directing people to Covering Wisconsin to get free, local help navigating the federal health insurance marketplace.
<p>BadgerCare Plus and Medicaid health care providers</p>	<p>DHS will notify affected providers through its ForwardHealth communication channels.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providers will be informed via ForwardHealth alerts and updates of provider-focused policies and practices impacted. • DHS will share with applicable providers specific fee-for-service reports of the members who need to renew.
<p>All FoodShare members</p> <p>Current enrollment data can be found at https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/foodshare/rsdata.htm</p>	<p>Members will no longer receive the extra FoodShare benefits they have been receiving due to the public health emergency. During the public health emergency, all members received extra supplemental benefits called “emergency allotments.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The extra benefit amount is the difference between a household’s allotment and the maximum allotment for their household size or \$95, whichever is more. • DHS currently issues approximately \$75 million each month in additional emergency FoodShare benefits through federal funding.
<p>All partners who accept FoodShare and those who provide community food support, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grocery stores • Farmer’s markets/farmers 	<p>Significant changes in the amount of FoodShare benefits issued will change how much money is spent in communities to buy food and will put more pressure on sources of food assistance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over the past year DHS issued approximately \$180 million each month in FoodShare benefits to approximately

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food banks • Pantries 	<p>400,000 Wisconsin families and over 700,000 individuals. We anticipate that as people renew their benefits, fewer individuals and families will still be eligible for benefits. Therefore, we expect the total amount in FoodShare benefits to decrease.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For context, before the COVID-19 pandemic, DHS issued approximately \$60 million each month in FoodShare benefits.
<p>Income maintenance agencies, which are typically part of county human services agencies and help process applications for public benefits programs. These agencies provide customer service support for members of BadgerCare Plus, Wisconsin Medicaid programs, and FoodShare.</p>	<p>There will be a substantial increase in workload to process renewals and address member questions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DHS will provide resources to help increase staffing at income maintenance agency call centers to handle large volume and provide customer service to members once the unwinding begins. • DHS has improved their websites and mobile applications with updated features so members can complete many renewal steps without having to contact their local agency.

Timing

The end of the federal public health emergency declaration is dependent on when HHS says the declaration is no longer needed to respond to COVID-19. [Public health emergency declarations are tied to a broad range of flexibilities used to respond to emergencies.](#)