



BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELORS: A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM THAT SHOULD BE EXPANDED

WIC's Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program is a cost-effective, evidence-based resource for pregnant women and new moms participating in WIC. The National WIC Association recommends increased federal support to make peer counselors available at all WIC locations, including full funding of the program at \$90 million.

HOW WIC SUPPORTS BREASTFEEDING

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has improved and expanded its breastfeeding support and promotion activities. Based on decades of strong evidence supporting the short- and long-term benefits of breastfeeding for the health of mothers, infants, and children, WIC promotes breastfeeding as the optimal feeding choice for participating families. Research indicates that breastfeeding can help reduce the risk of morbidity and mortality for both the infant and mother and, for infants, reduce the risk of developing obesity later in childhood. Due to the significant health benefits associated with breastfeeding, higher breastfeeding rates in the US lead to lower healthcare costs: The American Academy of Pediatrics

estimates that if 90% of US families exclusively breastfed infants for six months (compared to the current level of about 25% of families), the US would save \$13 billion per year.^{1,2}

Unfortunately, lower-income women in the US experience lower breastfeeding rates than middle- and higher-income women.³ In addition to income, race/ethnicity also plays a role in breastfeeding disparities in the US: African American women experience significantly lower breastfeeding rates than White and Hispanic women.⁴ Barriers to breastfeeding for these vulnerable groups include family and social pressures, a rapid return to work after delivery, lack of facilities to breastfeed or pump in the workplace and in public, and targeted marketing by the infant formula industry.⁵ By helping racially diverse low-income pregnant women and new moms overcome these barriers, WIC plays a vital role in improving breastfeeding rates and minimizing breastfeeding disparities.⁶

WIC supports breastfeeding through educational materials, classes and support groups, hotlines for questions, and peer and professional lactation support staff. Over the last 20 years, in recognition of the mounting evidence demonstrating the health benefits of breastfeeding, WIC has established a number of new breastfeeding initiatives, including evidence-based promotional campaigns, food package incentives, training curricula, provision of breast pumps, and efforts to change hospital policies to limit the distribution of formula.⁷

As a result of the strengthening and expansion of WIC's breastfeeding support and promotion services, the percentage of WIC moms who have initiated breastfeeding has increased dramatically—from 42% in 1998 to 71% in 2016.⁸ Breastfeeding duration has also improved in WIC: At seven

months postpartum, 26% of WIC moms are still breastfeeding, as opposed to only 12% of WIC moms in 1997.⁹



THE POWER OF PEER COUNSELING

One of WIC's most effective breastfeeding promotion strategies is its peer counseling program. Officially launched in 2004, the WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Program (BFPC) uses an evidence-based peer-to-peer model that connects pregnant and postpartum women with paraprofessional breastfeeding counselors who come from the same neighborhoods and speak the same language as WIC participants.^{10,11} WIC peer counselors, who are often current or former WIC participants with experience breastfeeding their own children, provide counseling services in person, in groups, over the phone, via video call, through texting or chatting, and/or during home visits.

Peer counselors understand the difficulties and provide realistic and practical guidance as a result of shared personal backgrounds and experience in ways that most health professionals cannot. In addition, peer

counselors are more cost-effective than professional lactation staff, and therefore WIC is able to hire a higher number of peer counselors than professional consultants. WIC's breastfeeding support activities are strongest when lactation-support professionals, peer counselors, and nutrition staff work together to provide a seamless continuum of care for WIC moms.¹²

A large body of evidence demonstrates that participation in the WIC BFPC is associated with an increased rate of breastfeeding initiation,^{13,14,15,16,17} and some studies have also found that participating leads to longer breastfeeding duration and improved exclusivity.^{18,19} Pregnant and postpartum WIC participants with access to a peer counselor report that they highly value the program, and are especially appreciative of peer counselors' warmth and accessibility.²⁰ Peer counselors are especially effective at increasing breastfeeding initiation and duration rates among African American WIC moms.^{22,23,24,25,26}



EVERY WIC MOM SHOULD HAVE ACCESS TO A WIC PEER COUNSELOR

Since 2005, recognizing the strong evidence of the program's health impact and cost-effectiveness, Congress has set aside funding each year to support the WIC BFPC. The annual WIC BFPC set-aside has grown from \$20 million to \$60 million over the last 13 years, allowing the program to expand dramatically. However, funding has remained at \$60 million since 2011 despite being authorized at \$90 million in the 2010 Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act.^{27,28}

As a result, 31% of local agencies do not have any form of a peer counseling

“ I AM ONE OF THE MANY WOMEN OF THIS STATE THAT HAS BENEFITED FROM THE BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELOR [PROGRAM]... MY DAUGHTER WOULD NOT LATCH ON... I TRIED FOR A WEEK TO GET HER TO LATCH ON TO MY BREAST, BUT HAD NO SUCCESS... I WAS GOING TO THROW IN THE TOWEL, BUT MY COUNSELOR CALLED ME THAT DAY WHEN I THOUGHT ALL HOPE WAS GONE AND GAVE ME GREAT INSTRUCTION ON HOW TO GET HER TO LATCH BACK ON. AFTER A WEEK OF DETERMINATION AND HELP THAT ONLY A BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELOR CAN GIVE, [MY DAUGHTER] START[ED] TO LATCH AND FEED LIKE A PRO. I AM THANKFUL AND BLESSED TO HAVE HAD A COUNSELOR AS GREAT AS SHE AND I STRIVE TO BE AS HELPFUL TO NEW BREASTFEEDING MOMS. ”

WIC PARTICIPANT, VIRGINIA

program, translating to about 560 local agencies nationwide.²⁹ Of the programs that do have access to a peer counselor, the peer counselor is often working part-time and is not able to assist every individual in need. There is a great deal of variation across different states in the proportion of local agencies that operate a peer counseling program, from a low of 11% to a high of 100%.³⁰

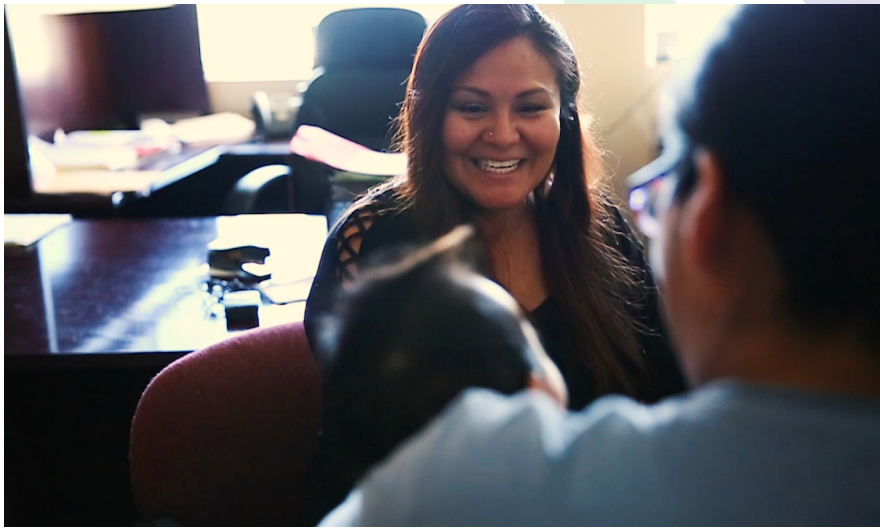
In light of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service's goal to integrate breastfeeding peer counseling as a service in every WIC clinic, more funding is needed. **The National WIC Association urges Congress to fund the WIC BFPC**

at the full authorized amount of \$90 million in FY 2020. The additional funding would enable hundreds of additional local agencies and clinics to establish peer counseling programs, expanding peer counselor access to thousands of pregnant and postpartum WIC participants.



“ MY FIRST DAUGHTER WAS BORN IN DECEMBER 2015, AND WE WERE UNDER THE DIRECT CARE OF NORMA ESCOBAR [A WIC BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELOR]... IN THE HOSPITAL MY MIDWIFE AND SUPPORT TEAM WATCHED AS BABY LATCHED AND NURSED DURING THE 24-HOUR HOSPITAL STAY... AT 9 WEEKS SHE WAS STILL CONSTANTLY NURSING BARELY OVER BIRTH WEIGHT... I REACHED OUT TO MOTHERS IN OUR AREA FOR DONOR MILK [WITH THE HELP OF WIC]... [MY DAUGHTER CHARLOTTE] FINALLY BEGAN TO GAIN WEIGHT WITH THREE DONOR BOTTLES A DAY AND NURSING ON DEMAND. WE INTEGRATED SOLIDS, AND I CONTINUED TO PUMP WITH THE WIC HOSPITAL-GRADE PUMP FOR THE REMAINDER OF CHARLOTTE'S FIRST YEAR OF LIFE! ...NOW A MOTHER OF TWO, TANDEM NURSING MY 2.5-YEAR-OLD AND 4-MONTH-OLD WITH ... MY OWN MILK! ...I WOULD NOT BE THE BREASTFEEDING MAMA AND DONOR MILK ADVOCATE I AM TODAY WITHOUT THE SUPPORT WIC PROVIDED TO ME DURING THE MOST CHALLENGING TIME IN MY LIFE! ...IT ALL STARTED WITH THE SUPPORT OF WIC! ”

WIC PARTICIPANT, NORTH CAROLINA



WIC: EMPOWERING FAMILIES, STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES

Please direct all questions to NWA at 202-232-5492.

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