

Comments of Stefan Harvey
following the screening of *Saving the Children: the Story of WIC*
at the NWA Nutrition Education and Breastfeeding Conference
Sept 8, 2014
Atlanta, Georgia

I am pleased to be in Atlanta this afternoon for the 2014 NWA Nutrition and Breastfeeding meeting. This indeed is a year you have much to celebrate. Not only is 2014 WIC's 40th birthday, 2014 is also a profound year for nutrition services and breastfeeding. The publication of final food package regulations in March was indeed a watershed development – a development that brought about changes many of you in this room recommended for years. Some among you, especially the breastfeeding advocates, might say that WIC finally came of age with the inclusion of this statement:

“The intent of the WIC Program is that all breastfeeding women be supported to exclusively breastfeed their infants and to choose the fully breastfeeding food package without infant formula.”

At long last WIC regulations strongly promote breastfeeding as the optimum way to feed infants. The breastfeeding advocates among you were tireless in your advocacy for this change. I wish Minda Lazarov – one of WIC's strongest breastfeeding advocates and a dear colleague and friend to many of us – were here today to celebrate this significant change.

I'm honored to have been asked to join you today; the years I spent advocating for WIC in Washington, DC, in state capitals and in localities across the country were exciting and deeply rewarding.

In addition to 2014 being the 40th year of WIC, 2014 is also 50 years since the Mississippi Freedom Summer – a summer which included organizing that preceded many of the ground breaking actions documented in *Saving the Children*.

I think it is significant that this meeting is being held here in the congressional district of one of the nation's most courageous elected officials. John Lewis, the legendary civil rights leader, was elected to represent the city of Atlanta in the House of Representatives in 1986 and since then he has provided moral leadership in the House of Representatives and been an inspiration to all committed to racial and social justice. His leadership seems especially important today given the tragedies of last month.

Much has happened in the past four decades. Reflection about WIC's progress along with a thorough examination and analysis of the early years provides helpful lessons, I believe.

Building on *Saving the Children*, it is the lessons of the early years I wish to discuss. Specifically, how did legal and community action lead to success?

Jim Thornton, aide to Senator Humphrey, notes in documentary the law required USDA to implement the program. However, also as noted, it took legal action to force USDA to release WIC funds. Legal action would not have been possible without an attorney and plaintiffs. *Saving the Children* reports Ron Pollock, an attorney at the Food Research and Action Center, handled the legal work. But who found the plaintiffs? Advocates along with local health professionals identified individuals potentially eligible for WIC who were willing to be plaintiffs in the suit. Imagine stepping forward to lend your name to a lawsuit against a federal agency. Dotson vs Butz, the first WIC lawsuit, filed in 1973 resulted in the courts mandating USDA to release the funds. In 1976, legal action again became necessary. Individuals and clinics in 10 states were plaintiffs in the 1976 class action suit, Durham vs. Butz; this suit charged USDA with impounding funds and failing to take affirmative action to begin WIC in the neediest areas. Here again the lawyers were successful. Under court orders, USDA released program regulations, funded local programs and later allocated funds to state health departments.

The important role of plaintiffs in these legal actions can't be overstated. No plaintiffs no case. I well remember speaking with individuals across the country about joining as plaintiffs. My task as a national advocate was to help identify agencies eager to initiate WIC programs and willing to take risks inherent in being plaintiffs in a lawsuit. Bold action was taken by those who joined the suits.

As Ron Pollock explained in *Saving the Children*, legal action achieved remedies to spend funds including previous year's funding thereby increasing the annual appropriation substantially. This happened more than once. Delays cost USDA small yearly budgets; delays were challenged in the courts and the legal decisions resulted in large sums being available for program expansion in many years of the early 1970's. With the massive increases in available funding community action was essential; community action which included coordinated work between and by advocacy organizations, local and state health departments was critical.

Community action included grassroots organizing and mobilizations to publicize the availability of WIC to increase participation. In Wyoming, the question of whether WIC should operate in the state became a topic of widespread discussion across the state. At the height of a statewide organizing effort to convince the Wyoming Legislature to accept WIC funds, advocates in Washington, DC were told the issue was debated throughout the state even including in beauty parlors. Major outreach campaigns were launched in many states and by November 1978 national WIC participation exceeded 1.3 million as WIC operated in 21 Native American communities, 49 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Finally in 1980, the powers-that-be in Wyoming succumbed to the pressure and agreed to accept WIC funds making WIC national in scope; that year nationally, more than 2 million were served.

Community organizing and outreach campaigns were new to many responsible for administering WIC and many funded local agencies also had little experience with such efforts.

Collaboration with advocacy organizations and the formation of regional and state WIC organizations/associations helped share best practices and successful strategies for increasing growth.

Senator Humphrey successfully sought and gained strong bi-partisan support for the WIC when he introduced his bill as noted in *Saving the Children*. Throughout the early years one of WIC's strengths was its strong support among Republicans, Democrats, liberals and conservatives. This support came from the leadership of Senators Humphrey and McGovern **and** as result of work done by hundreds, if not thousands, of local WIC staff across the country. Early on community action also included the education members of Congress. Throughout the 1970s, state and local WIC leaders and advocates took the time to educate Congress about the need for WIC and its successes often traveling to Washington, DC to testify before Congress. This activity has continued since the 1970's, and I contend, is one reason WIC continues to have bipartisan support today despite a radically different political climate in Washington, D.C. than the political climate of the 1970's.

Activism has been an integral part of WIC since the day Senator Humphrey introduced his bill. There is little question that without the legal and community activism of the early 1970's today there would be far fewer WIC participants; far fewer healthy children and far fewer WIC professionals.

Some in the WIC community of the 1970's might not have imagined activism would be an aspect of their work as they studied nutrition, dietetics and or maternal health. Our colleagues who worked the WIC clinics of the early 1970's and those who made the jobs possible (by finding plaintiffs, submitting applications) were role models worth noting and emulating.

This past May, Congressman John Lewis gave the commencement address at Emory University, five miles from here. I believe his message to the Emory graduates was strikingly relevant for the WIC community too. He said,

“...do your best to seek justice. And never, ever turn back; never, ever give up; but keep the faith and continue to work for what is right, for what is fair, and for what is just.”

WIC is right; WIC is fair and WIC is just.

I'd like to close by sharing an excerpt from a sermon my mother's minister delivered to his congregation this past year – My mother's minister borrowed the excerpt from a 1991 sermon of Rev. Patrick T. O'Neill, a Unitarian Universalist minister then of Framingham, Mass. Reverent O'Neill said, and I quote:

“Among the most accomplished and fabled tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is perhaps surprising, then, to learn the traditional greeting that passed between Masai

warriors: "Kasserian Ingera," one would always say to another. It means, "And how are the children?"

Even warriors with no children of their own would always give the traditional answer, "All the children are well." Meaning, of course, that peace and safety prevail, that the priorities of protecting the young, the powerless, are in place.....

I wonder how it might affect our consciousness of our own children's welfare, if in our culture we took to greeting each other with this daily question: and how are the children? I wonder if we heard that question and passed it along to each other a dozen times a day, if it would begin to make a difference in the reality of how children are thought of or cared about in our own country.

Wonder, if you will,if every adult among us, parent and non-parent alike, felt an equal weight for the daily care and protection of all the children in our community, in our town, in our state, in our country. . . . "

I congratulate each of you for your work – work to make the children well. And finally, I would like to leave you with the words of Congressman John Lewis, "...keep the faith and continue to work for what is right, for what is fair, and for what is just."

Thank you.

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