



# Advancing Health Equity to Achieve Diversity and Inclusion (AHEAD) in WIC

## Case Study: Morrisania WIC

### NWA's MISSION

The National WIC Association (NWA) provides its members with tools and leadership to expand and sustain effective nutrition services for mothers and young children.

### AHEAD IN WIC BACKGROUND

In 2019, the National WIC Association (NWA) received a grant from the Walmart Foundation to support a two-year project aimed at Advancing Health Equity to Achieve Diversity & Inclusion (AHEAD) in WIC. One of the key goals of AHEAD was to systematically build capacity within the larger WIC community to incorporate a health equity framework into WIC research, policy, and practice. As part of AHEAD and NWA's efforts to advance equity, the organization selected seven local WIC agencies to pilot promising practices to create an infrastructure and encourage organizational change to support equitable access to WIC services. Morrisania WIC received funding from AHEAD to pilot a project to continue employing peer counselors as they provided WIC services to new and expecting mothers, continuing education units (CEUs) to BIPOC professionals and equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training for WIC staff.

### MORRISANIA BACKGROUND

Morrisania is a residential neighborhood in southwestern Bronx, New York City, New York. Morrisania WIC's sponsoring agency is part of New York City (NYC) Health and Hospitals, which is the largest public hospital system in the US. They recently created a large Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), which includes health

centers in every borough. Although Morrisania WIC operates three sites, the main site is in Gotham Health/Morrisania, a large comprehensive health center providing adult medicine, pediatrics, women's health, podiatry, ophthalmology, radiology, behavioral health, child development, dental, and other care. Morrisania WIC is an integral component of the Pediatrics and Women's Health teams and has an average monthly case-load of 7,200 participants.



Gotham Health/Morrisania is located in the poorest congressional district in the nation. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2016 data revealed that 38.3% of Morrisania's population lived below the federal poverty level, compared to 19.8% for NYC and 14.9% for New York State (NYS). According to the Robert Wood Johnson County Health Rankings Report, Bronx residents consistently have the lowest ranking for quality of life and life expectancy compared to residents in any county in NYS.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, social determinants of health (SDOH) are "conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes."<sup>4</sup> The social determinants of health have a profound impact on health

equity in the Bronx.<sup>1</sup>The Morrisania community ranks worse than the borough (Bronx), NYC, and NYS in most health/community indicators. The participants served by Morrisania WIC are primarily Hispanic/Latinx, with families from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Mexico, South America, and Central America. These populations all have different cultures and health needs. Morrisania WIC also has a large African American population and a growing West African and Bangladeshi community. The racial and ethnic breakdown of the community is 70% Hispanic/Latinx, 25% African American, 4% African/South Asian (Bangladeshi), and 1% Other. A large percentage of the participants served by Morrisania WIC also have limited English proficiency.

Morrisania WIC has 23 staff members, including Breastfeeding Peer Counselors and Temporary Agency Workers. The staff at Morrisania WIC are racially and ethnically diverse, including 59% Hispanic/Latinx, 23% African American, 9% Asian, and 9% White. Of staff delivering nutrition and breastfeeding services, 50% are Hispanic/Latinx, 29% are African American, 29% are African, 7% are Asian, and 14% are White.

## OVERALL PROJECT GOAL

The purpose of Morrisania WIC's AHEAD project was to 1) address breastfeeding disparities through an Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) lens by providing mentoring and training opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and other individuals underrepresented in the lactation profession; 2) to expand the community reach of the Breastfeeding Peer Counselor (PC) services within the Morrisania/Gotham Health Pediatric Department, Lincoln Hospital and local pharmacies; and 3) increase EDI knowledge and awareness among WIC staff, particularly related to providing culturally-responsive and gender-inclusive lactation support for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) WIC participants.

## OVERALL PROJECT GOAL

Morrisania WIC used a multi-faceted approach for its project. Specific activities included: 1) increasing the number of contacts Breastfeeding Peer Counselors made with pregnant and

lactating people, including providing bedside counseling for WIC parents in the Mother/Baby Unit at Lincoln Hospital and Pediatrics/Women's Health at Gotham Health/Morrisania, at least four days a week; 2) providing professional assistance and virtual continuing education sessions intended for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals interested in furthering their career in lactation; and 3) providing staff training on EDI at monthly staff meetings.



## EVALUATION METHODS

In collaboration with NWA and the AHEAD evaluation team, an evaluation logic model and metrics table were created for Morrisania WIC in at the beginning of the project. Metrics for the evaluation included the number of partnerships and relationships (internal and external) established and sustained by Morrisania WIC during the grant period to support program goals. Additionally, the evaluation also focused on understanding community partners' perceptions about and satisfaction with their relationship with Morrisania WIC. To understand the impact of the breastfeeding support provided, the number of hours PCs delivered services to new and expectant birthing people and birthing people's awareness of WIC services was assessed. The evaluation also examined the reach and impact of the professional assistance and virtual continuing education sessions intended for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals, including the average number of hours and satisfaction with the learning content. Lastly, the effects of the EDI training on staff EDI knowledge, awareness, and practices were examined.

The data for the evaluation was primarily collected through online surveys using SurveyMonkey, with both qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitative data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Descriptive statistics were analyzed using SPSS software. Additionally, one partner and two WIC peer counselor (PC) staff members were interviewed using semi-structured interviews via Zoom to collect additional qualitative data. The interviews were transcribed and coded using qualitative content analysis.

## RESULTS

### *Partnerships and Lactation Support Services*

Over the past few years, the funding for the Morrisania PC program declined significantly. Consequently, a major focus of Morrisania WIC's AHEAD project was to provide gap funding for their PC program. The AHEAD grant allowed Morrisania WIC to maintain and expand existing PC services and enabled PCs to offer bedside counseling to pregnant and birthing parents in the Mother/Baby Unit at Lincoln Hospital and the Pediatrics/Women's Health Department at Gotham Health/Morrisania. As a result, PCs increased their average number of patient contacts by 42%. Additionally, from October 2021 to February 2022, PCs provided culturally responsive lactation information and support to 177 pregnant and birthing individuals at partner sites, including 14 virtual visits/calls and 129 bedside visits with patients at Lincoln Hospital and 33 Pediatrics/Women's Health Department at Gotham Health/Morrisania. A small sample of participants (n=16) was surveyed to assess satisfaction with PC services. When asked how helpful lactation support was on a scale of 1-10, the average rating was 9.6. During an interview, one of the PCs described an encounter with a birthing parent at Lincoln Hospital and later at the clinic:

"I saw one mom at the hospital, Lincoln Hospital. Like I saw her [as a patient]. She had her baby, I helped her with latching. Of course, I help[ed] her, and then like 5 days after that, I saw her at Morrisania in Pediatric, and that was amazing. Because I saw the mom at the hospital. Then I saw her at Morrisania, and then I called her... She was really happy like, 'Oh, wow! I see you here. Nice.'

## Morissania AHEAD Project by the Numbers:

**42%** Increase in number of patient contacts by Breastfeeding Peer Counselors after implementation of AHEAD project

**177** Number of pregnant and birthing individuals provide lactation support by Breastfeeding Peer Counselors

**9.6/10** Rating of the helpfulness of lactation services by patients

**83%** Percent of Morissania WIC Staff that agreed that AHEAD trainings increased their familiarity with equity, diversity, and implicit bias

The PC also described how their presence at the hospital also served as outreach to potential WIC participants:

*They are happy, even moms that are not from our [agency], because I saw some moms that didn't know about WIC. When I provided the information to them. I gave the paper the information, and I told them they can apply with us... They like 'ok, I am going to apply. Okay, but you know about WIC now, and they were happy to get the information.'*

A representative from one of the partner organizations/departments also had a positive perception of the services provided:

*"Well, we are a baby-friendly designated hospital. So having that community collaboration, I think it's a great for both of us. So, I would like to, you know, it's a pleasure working with them, and we'll continue to work together."*

At the end of the project, six additional PCs were recruited, interviewed, and trained to represent the African, Caribbean, African American, and Latinx communities. The new PCs will be hired with limited hours in the next couple of months.

### *EDI Training*

EDI trainings were provided during or after staff meetings. The sessions focused on several topics, including LGBTQ+ populations and lactation and the use of gender-inclusive language during service provision. Staff members were asked to write their reflections about presentations after staff meetings and most chose to reflect on the EDI training. Nineteen WIC staff members responded to the survey reporting their perceptions of the EDI trainings. Overall, staff agreed that the EDI information provided was valuable and relevant to their role in WIC. Specific results indicated that a majority of respondents found that the workshops, training sessions and/or staff discussions met or exceeded their expectations (88%); increased their familiarity with equity, diversity, and implicit bias (83%); increased their familiarity with microaggressions (71%); increased their familiarity with anti-racism (73%); and helped them reflect on how their beliefs, values, and privileges impact their decisions and actions in WIC (83%). Additionally, 72% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they are extremely likely or somewhat likely to use EDI practices at work in the next month.

The peer counselor interviews offer further context for understanding the impact of the EDI training on staff knowledge, awareness, and practices. PCs described that they became more aware of the use of gender-inclusive language, for example using “family/parents” instead of “mom/mother.” PCs indicated that the trainings increased their confidence in their ability to serve LGBTQ+ populations. One PC explained:

“We knew but we didn’t have the information, we didn’t know how to ask questions. We didn’t know like what to ask. We were like afraid to talk, because we didn’t know what to say. But, now what I hear from them [staff] is the same like they feel more confident, more open.”



### *Continuing Education for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ Populations*

Seventy people registered for the virtual continuing education sessions that were offered by Morrisania WIC to support BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals in furthering their career in lactation. 74% of the attendees identified as Black/African American, 4% Asian, 20% Hispanic/Latinx (with some overlap with other categories), and 6% Other; 5% also identified as LGBTQ+. Participants attending the sessions were from across the country, including California, Mississippi, Washington DC, Alabama, Texas, and New York.

Additionally, 36% were Certified Lactation Consultants (CLC), 32% were WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counselors, 29% were Doulas, and 7% were WIC Dietician/Nutritionists. Other certification and training among the participants included RN/Nurse Practitioners, Physicians, Lactation Interns, and lactating/birthing parents. The program content was delivered across eight sessions (16 hours total), provided guidance on how to effectively respond to International Board of Lactation Consultant Examiners (IBLCE) test questions, and answered questions for individuals regarding their personal career goals. About half of participants (n=32) attended at least one session. Approximately 77% of those attending the sessions were WIC PCs or CLCs. Additionally, 39% of those registered were able to receive at least one Continuing Education Recognition Point (CERPs) for their participation in the sessions.

80% (n=26) of the participants who attended at least one session completed a follow-up survey. Approximately 84% indicated that they were participating in continuing education on lactation because they were interested in helping people, followed by desiring to learn new skills to stay marketable (69%), and lastly personal fulfillment (54%). Additionally, respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the program (91%); they are more aware of additional professional career pathways in lactation (80%); they feel more confident in continuing their pursuit of becoming a lactation professional (87%); and that the program opportunity would be beneficial to other BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and underrepresented population in the field looking to advance their education and skills in lactation support (81%).

## KEY INSIGHTS

While implementing the AHEAD in WIC project, Morrisania WIC faced several challenges.

**COVID19:** Due to the Covid-19 surge in NYC (when they had more than 45% positivity rates) starting in December 2021, WIC staff had to pause the on-site Pediatrics presence and bedside visits at Lincoln Hospital. Instead of the on-site bedside visits, they obtained a list of birthing parents in the hospital three to five times per week and contacted them to see if they were interested in a virtual lactation support visit.

### Higher Baseline Awareness of Diversity and EDI:

In contrast to demographics for the WIC community nationally, 95% of the staff at Morrisania WIC are Hispanic/Latinx and/or Black/African American. Additionally, on the EDI follow-up survey, 71% of respondents indicated that they attended at least one EDI training prior to the AHEAD project, and a large number of respondents (35%) reported they attended five or more. As a result, many of the staff at Morrisania WIC may not have benefited as much from the EDI trainings as staff at a WIC site that had never participated in EDI training. For example, one staff member described:

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Morrisania WIC implemented multiple approaches to increase EDI across different levels within their agency. A primary focus of the project was obtaining funding to sustain and expand PC services to support more WIC participants. Additionally, they aimed to reach birthing parents by partnering with organizations and agencies. Morrisania WIC also launched a national continuing education program for BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and other populations underrepresented in the lactation profession that could serve as a model for increasing diversity among lactation professionals nationally.

## REFERENCES

- 1 <https://www.nychealthandhospitals.org/lincoln-services/womens-health/>
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- 3 <https://furmancenter.org/neighborhoods/view/morrisania-crotona>
- 4 CDC. About Social Determinants of Health. <https://www.cdc.gov/socialdeterminants/about.html>. Accessed on June 29, 2022

