



# PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF WIC'S NUTRITION WORKFORCE

## NWA RECOMMENDS:

USDA and credentialing bodies should strengthen pipelines for diverse nutrition and lactation support professionals to build careers in WIC.

As WIC increasingly leverages new technologies to enhance access and services, WIC's strength remains the dedicated workforce of nutrition professionals who counsel and support parents and families during a transformative period of their life. To strengthen WIC's reach and expertise, USDA and WIC providers must adapt to diversify the workforce and reimagine positions to enhance staff retention and professional opportunities.

## CHANGES IN THE PROFESSION

WIC's community nutrition services draw from a mix of credentialed professionals and paraprofessionals. Although USDA has emphasized the benefits of staffing Registered Dietitian Nutritionists (RDNs) and International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs), many clinics - particularly rural providers - cannot attract highly credentialed staff or offer competitive salaries that can retain such staff. Community nutrition is the lowest compensated specialty in the dietetics field, with a median salary that is \$14,000 per year lower than the average RDN.

Even though only 10% of WIC nutrition educators hold a graduate degree, the Commission on Dietetic Registration will require, in 2024, that entry-level RDNs hold a graduate degree. This will sharply affect WIC's ability to staff RDNs and undermine efforts to diversify a profession that remains overwhelmingly white.



WIC has creatively pushed the field and relied on homegrown talent to curate nutrition expertise and serve WIC families. In 2004, WIC instituted a Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program - training former WIC moms to deliver peer support. This served as a pipeline for former participants, reflective of the communities they now served, to train and obtain higher credentials in nutrition, lactation support, and healthcare.

## BUILDING PIPELINES

With the Commission unwilling to reconsider the 2024 graduate degree requirement, WIC providers must take action to grow and diversify the next generation of nutrition professionals. Especially with the flexibility provided through remote appointments, State agencies may experiment with new business models to leverage a smaller workforce of credentialed professionals. WIC providers must be deliberate in preserving the trust placed in WIC nutrition educators by participating families, who value the advice and expertise provided by a nutritionist, regardless of the credential.

In spring 2023, NWA was awarded a \$1.2 million grant from the Walmart Foundation to catalyze new efforts to support, strengthen, and diversify the WIC workforce. This project will seek to increase and diversify credentialed professionals in WIC, create career ladders for paraprofessionals, and provide in-depth equity, diversity, and inclusion training for State and local WIC staff. This work will complement USDA's efforts to leverage the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and partnerships with land-grant universities to develop a five-year WIC workforce strategy.

As USDA, NWA, and WIC partners work to build pipelines, enhancing WIC's linkages with healthcare delivery can also be an effective strategy. By integrating WIC into broader healthcare systems, RDNs could offer a wider range of services that draw on their clinical training and can be billable to Medicaid or private health plans. This could enhance compensation and increase professional opportunities, while retaining RDNs within WIC and better coordinating care for WIC families.

