



WIC'S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING BREASTFEEDING

NWA RECOMMENDS:

Congress should increase investment in WIC's breastfeeding support to ensure community infrastructure to help families navigate infant feeding choices and fulfill their breastfeeding goals.

EMPOWERING MOMS

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) has embraced breastfeeding support and promotion as a core element of program services. With medical and dietary guidance - including the first-ever life-stages approach of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans - consistently calling for exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life, WIC is structured to support families in setting and meeting their breastfeeding goals while delivering the nutrients needed by infants to grow and thrive.

WIC staffing includes a combination of professional and peer lactation support that helps families set goals, build support networks, and navigate breastfeeding challenges, such as latching difficulty and milk supply issues. In 2004, WIC established a federal Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program to invest more resources into peer support and create workforce pathways for former WIC participants. The Peer Counselor Program has expanded with increased federal funding in 2010 and 2020, ensuring that more families can access peer support. NWA has called for funding for the Peer Counselor Program to be doubled, ensuring more consistent access to peer counselors while leveraging out-of-clinic placements, including in healthcare settings like hospitals.



In addition to the education and support provided by WIC's lactation workforce, WIC can loan breast pumps to participants and counsel on how to sustain breastfeeding when returning to a workplace. Starting in 1992, the WIC food packages include added value to encourage exclusive breastfeeding, with USDA's recent updates in 2022 proposing greater incentives in the partially breastfed package as well.

WIC's commitment to breastfeeding has resulted in improved outcomes, with initiation increasing by 30% among WIC mothers between 1998 and 2020. Targeted WIC support, including peer counselors hired from the community where services are being delivered, has worked to narrow entrenched racial disparities and support breastfeeding among Black and Indigenous women. Peer counselors work to navigate familial, cultural, and historic barriers to breastfeeding while building family and community support for each individual mom's journey.

SUSTAINED SUPPORT

In addition to supporting moms in their choice to initiate breastfeeding, WIC staff serve as cheerleaders for the duration of a mom's breastfeeding journey. Families must navigate several challenges in ongoing breastfeeding, with less than one-in-five WIC infants being breastfed at twelve months. Redoubling efforts to support breastfeeding duration is even more critical as the American Academy of Pediatrics now recommends ongoing breastfeeding until two years.

WIC providers have been at the forefront of advocacy for workplace policies that encourage breastfeeding and pumping support. NWA played a significant role in advancing the PUMP for Nursing Mothers Act, closing a loophole for nine million workers who will now enjoy legal protections for break time and a private space to pump. WIC staff remain committed to addressing structural barriers while supporting individual moms on their journey.

