

## Section 10: Retaining Peer Counselors

Welcome to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service webcast on mentoring and supervising peer counselors. I'm Patti Mitchell with the Food and Nutrition Service WIC Program. This is webcast #6 from our series of webcasts from the FNS Peer Counseling curricula: Loving Support Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together.

The webcast will provide a summary of key highlights from Sections 9 and 10 of the management curriculum on mentoring and supervising peer counselors. It's not possible to go through the entire module in this webcast, so we'd like to remind you to please refer to the *detailed* speaker notes and handouts for these sections. State agencies will need to use the information provided in the detailed speaker notes to develop their policies and also to train their local agency managers.

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### Mentoring and Supervising Peer Counselors

- WIC agencies through the years have found that mentoring and ongoing supervision of peer counselors is integral to sustaining a successful peer counseling program.
- Supervision requires careful attention and guidance, continual availability to peer counselors, and ongoing support.

I am going to turn over the next portion of the webcast to Cathy Carothers from Every Mother, Inc. who will go through the important considerations for mentoring and supervising peer counselors.

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### Dedicated Supervisors Are Key

- Research shows that having designated coordinators/managers and supervisors with dedicated time allocated to supervise peer counselors are important to program success.
- Most programs are managed at the local level, with statewide standards issued for supervising and monitoring the program. Supervisors tend to be:
  - Local agency breastfeeding coordinators.
  - Regional or local peer counselor coordinators.
  - Local agency nutritionists.
  - Staff or contract lactation consultants.
  - Regional or district level breastfeeding coordinators.

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### Becoming a Good Supervisor

- Very few people are born with innate supervisory skills.
- These are skills that are usually learned and practiced.
- Check out supervisory training resources that may be available through your State Department of Health and encourage supervisors to take the time to learn and practice skills at motivating and mentoring others.

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### The Early Days of Supervision



- People are easily motivated when they feel they are learning new things and growing in positive ways. Effective supervisors provide opportunities for that type of personal growth.



Tell her what the expectations are (through training).



Observe her performance and give her helpful feedback.



Show her how the job is done (through shadowing).



Praise her progress.



Let her try it on her own.

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### Mentoring vs. Supervision

- Most WIC peer counselor supervisors have found it effective to function as “mentors” in the first six months of a peer counselor’s job while she is learning new skills. In order to be able to give effective feedback, the supervisor/mentor should be knowledgeable and skilled in breastfeeding. This provides the best understanding of the types of situations that a peer counselor encounters in counseling pregnant and breastfeeding women.
- A mentor is someone who serves as a coach, providing guidance, resources, training, and support as the peer counselor grows her skills.
- A mentor makes allowances in the beginning as the peer counselor is learning the job.
- A good mentor:
  - Maintains frequent contact to give peer counselors many opportunities to debrief on the contacts they are making with mothers and to address early challenges.
  - Listens and asks questions to help the peer counselor explore feelings about the job.
  - Encourages her to problem solve.
  - Challenges her to try new things and use her skills in new ways.
- Provides information, guidance, and support.

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### Praise and Affirm

- Observe the peer counselor during early contacts with mothers in the clinic to provide guidance and praise.
- When a peer counselor demonstrates she can manage calls well, she can begin handling contacts on her own.
- Maintain weekly contacts by phone or clinic visits.
- Explore her progress and concerns.
- Help her troubleshoot any challenges of working the job into her personal life.
- “Staffing and Supervision 11: Questions for Mentors” can be used for weekly contacts.
- Be patient and gentle when peer counselors do not perform as expected initially. New job skills take time to learn!
- Model effective counseling skills by using open-ended questions and affirmation in your conversations with her.

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- Offer additional training and shadowing opportunities as needed.



### Other Supervisory Skills

- Goals are a roadmap to assure peer counselors they are headed in the right direction.
- Goals help peer counselors see when changes or improvements need to be made, and feel pride when those goals are reached.
- Feedback:
  - Peer counselors need continuous feedback from the supervisor, especially in the early days.
- Contacts in the clinic or on the phone will help them realize they are not alone.
- Being available as a resource as they encounter new situations they may be unsure about will help them grow as peer counselors.
- Providing a performance review to check in with peer counselors periodically can be another effective way to provide feedback, revisit the peer counselor's goals, and assess strengths and areas for improvement. The sample "Mentoring Tool" can provide a starting point for developing performance review tools apply in your agency.
- Praise:
  - Peer counselors need praise for both the big accomplishments and small victories along the way to the big accomplishments.
  - Celebrating successes will help peer counselors feel proud and motivated to continue growing.



### Ongoing Support

- After around six months, when the peer counselor has demonstrated that she is functioning well, your relationship with the peer counselor can shift to more of a supervisory role.
- Discuss this changing relationship with her. Allow her to set new goals for where she would like to be, and identify what support will help her get there.

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- Let her know that she is now responsible for doing her paperwork properly, attending staff meetings without being reminded, and following appropriate procedures.
- Regular contacts remain important, particularly if peer counselors work from home and are more isolated than other local agency staff.

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### Monthly Staff Meetings

- Monthly staff meetings help peer counselors keep their training skills sharp.
- These meetings are heavily used by nearly all successful programs.

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### Peer Counselor Monitoring

- Supervisors are responsible for monitoring the work of peer counselors. This can be especially important if peer counselors are working from home.
- Weekly phone contacts allow supervisors to be on top of the day-to-day work of peer counselors and the clients they are contacting.
- Regular review of contact logs.
- Spot checks are a crucial part of program monitoring, particularly for staff who work from home.
- If spot checks reveal that client contacts are not being made as reported, conduct additional checks and follow up with the peer counselor as needed.

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### Reasons to Dismiss a Peer Counselor

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- Although it is not common, supervisors occasionally must release a peer counselor from her duties. Some reasons might be:
- Fraudulently reporting activity.
- Failing to perform job duties. Breaking confidentiality, as determined by your State's policies and procedures.

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### Respecting and Empowering Peer Counselors

- Supporting peer counselors should be an integral part of the program.
- Peer counselors are often in difficult life circumstances themselves.
- Providing support and nurturing clients can be emotionally draining.
- Peer counselors who work from home may experience isolation.
- Ensure timely pay checks.
- Be sensitive to transportation challenges
- Accommodate child care. If peer counselors have infants and/or older children, look for ways to make the job easier by allowing them to bring young infants in arms to the clinic. Hold peer counselor meetings in locations where children will be welcomed.

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### Supporting Peer Counselors

- Keeping them connected regularly to the supervisor and with other peer counselors helps keep them motivated and feeling good about their role.

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### When Peer Counselors Leave

- When a peer counselor leaves her position, always conduct an exit interview.
- Learn the factors involved in her decision.
- Identify recommendations that can improve the program.

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### Retaining Peer Counselors

- Peer counselors typically love their jobs and feel their work is a true labor of love.
- Many peer counselors report they would be happy if nothing about the program changed. However, the reality is that many do not stay with the program after a time. This can pose frustrations for program managers.

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### Why Peer Counselors Leave

#### Key Talking Points:

- If the WIC peer counseling job is such an ideal dream job, why do peer counselors leave?

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### Job-related Reasons Peer Counselors Leave

*Low wages*

*Burnout:*

*Isolation*

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### Personal Reasons Peer Counselors Leave

Some peer counselors leave for reasons beyond WIC's control.

*Stressful, personal life*

*The job is not a good fit*

*Seek other opportunities*

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### Turnover Is Not Necessarily Negative

- Although dealing with staff turnover can be frustrating, it is helpful to see the positive aspects, which often indicate program success.
- Peer counselors often grow professionally in many ways through their work with WIC.
- Learning new job skills empowers them as members of the health care team, and develops them professionally in ways that ready them for new job challenges.
- Many peer counselors go on to become full-time WIC staff, attend nursing school, enroll in dietetic programs, or pursue other service occupations.
- Peer counselors who leave the WIC program often continue to provide breastfeeding information and support within their community to neighbors, family, and friends.
- Because they have been educated and trained, they are now in the community providing accurate information and support.

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### Solutions for Retention

WIC staff support:

- A WIC clinic environment that openly promotes and supports breastfeeding and the peer counseling program speaks volumes to mothers and reinforces peer counseling support
- Breastfeeding promotion activities:
- Many WIC agencies use peer counselors to assist in planning and implementing World Breastfeeding Week activities each year. These activities help strengthen bonding between peer counselors and give them a sense of common purpose.

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- Supervision:
- Supervisors who stay in touch with peer counselors are more likely to pick up on issues before they get out of hand.
- Sensitivity to personal issues:
- Adequate compensation:
- Programs that pay peer counselors are more likely to retain them.
- Adding “benefits” and regular raises are perceived as positive benefits for peer counselors.
- Having a career ladder program (see Section 6, Scope of Practice) with different pay scales has been found to improve buy-in and retention.



### Celebrate Successes!

- WIC agencies that celebrate successes are able to maintain a positive environment and energy for moving forward.
- Have a party periodically when new milestones are accomplished, at peer counseling graduations, when peer counselors are ready to move into a more advanced position, or when positive feedback is received from WIC mothers about the program.

Thanks Cathy, I think this is one of the most important modules in the training curriculum. Adequate and continued supervision, monitoring and support of peer counselors is one of the required components of the FNS Loving Support Model for a Successful WIC Program. We heard today a variety of ways to make this work in your WIC Program. Again please refer to the detailed speaker notes and all of the resources available to you in the management curriculum for further examples and recommendations on this topic. You can find these materials on the WIC Works Resource System.

- We hope you found this webcast useful, thank you for listening. And thank you for all you do for peer counselors and WIC mothers.