Welcome to the USDA Food and Nutrition Service webcast on staffing considerations for peer counselors. I’m Patti Mitchell with the Food and Nutrition Service WIC Program. This is webcast #3 from our series of webcasts from the FNS Peer Counseling curricula: Loving Support Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together.

Hiring the right people as peer counselors helps a program get off to the best start. Peer counselors are enthusiastic and work hard to make a program smooth and successful.

In this webcast we will address important qualities to seek, how to find people with those qualities, and considerations in hiring and employing them.

Webcast #3 is for those involved in implementing, managing, or providing oversight to peer counseling programs.

The webcast will provide a summary of key highlights from Sections 5 of the management curriculum. 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 modules. 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.

**Loving Support Model**

The “Loving Support© Model for a Successful Peer Counseling Program” is the FNS framework for State agencies to use to establish policies and practices under each of its required components. One of those required components is the appropriate definition of peer counselor in the WIC Program, which we will present in today’s webcast.
I am going to turn over the next portion of the webcast to Kendal Cox from Every Mother, Inc. who will go through a summary of key points of the curriculum on staffing considerations for peer counselors.

FNS Definition of a Peer Counselor

The **Loving Support®** Model is based on research demonstrating the benefit of mother-to-mother support in helping women to initiate and continue breastfeeding.

Peer counselors, as defined by this research, are women in the community with personal breastfeeding experience who provide information and support to other mothers. They serve as role models for new mothers.

Research recommends that an ideal WIC peer counselor:

- Has previous breastfeeding experience.
- Is a current or previous WIC participant or has similarities with the WIC participants served (for example, ethnic background, age, language, income).
- Is a paraprofessional or lay person.

The **Loving Support®** Model requires, at a minimum, the following three criteria as critical to the definition of a peer counselor in WIC:

- **Paraprofessional.**
  
  Recruited and hired from WIC’s target population of WIC-eligible women.
  
  Available to WIC clients outside the WIC clinic environment.

FNS strongly recommends that WIC State agencies hire peer counselors with previous breastfeeding experience. However, in some cases the pool of women with breastfeeding experience from which to hire

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1. Those without extended professional training in health, nutrition, or the clinical management of breastfeeding who are selected from the group to be served and are trained and given ongoing supervision to provide a basic service or function. Paraprofessionals provide specific tasks within a defined scope of practice. They assist professionals, but are not licensed or credentialed as healthcare, nutrition, or lactation consultant professionals.
peer counselors may be quite small initially. This is especially the case in rural and smaller WIC programs.

State agencies have the flexibility to develop, implement, or enhance peer counseling programs appropriate to the needs of their local agencies. However, the required components of the Loving Support© Model must be included.

Research with WIC programs reveals staff consider several additional criteria to be critical in hiring potential staff.

Enthusiasm for breastfeeding:
Many feel enthusiasm is half the battle.
If a woman is enthusiastic about breastfeeding, she can be taught what she needs to function well as a peer counselor.

Communication skills:
Peer counselors need basic communication skills. They need the ability to answer questions thoroughly, to clearly articulate information, and to be understood clearly.

Although counseling principles can be taught and practiced, a basic ability to communicate well and promote breastfeeding go a long way toward preparing a peer counselor for the job.

Prior breastfeeding experience:
Most programs believe that at least 6 months of previous breastfeeding is important, because it means the woman has worked through many of the early adjustments needed and may be better able to relate to mothers as they continue breastfeeding.

Current or previous WIC participant:
Having benefited from WIC services helps mothers better relate to their peers and better promote WIC.
Women who meet income guidelines for WIC may have faced similar struggles of low-income families and can better offer breastfeeding solutions given the unique hardships they face.

Same language and culture as WIC mothers:

All programs should set priorities for qualities that are most important in meeting the needs of the agency and the community. Sometimes
Who Is a Peer?

FNS funding for peer counseling specifically targets paying for “peer” counselors. State agencies must agree to the definition of a peer counselor which includes being a paraprofessional, recruited and hired from the target population, and available to WIC clients outside the clinic environment.

Only Women?

The definition of peer counselor in the Loving Support© Model is based on research demonstrating the benefit of hiring peer counselors from WIC’s target population of WIC-eligible women. Breastfeeding peer counseling funding may only be used to hire peer counselors from WIC’s target population.

Males are valuable members of breastfeeding promotion and support programs. WIC State and local agencies may use their regular WIC Nutrition Services and Administration funds for activities that support WIC’s education efforts. This may include father-led support groups, that are beyond the scope of the Loving Support© Model.

Older Moms?

Ideally WIC agencies should select peer counselors similar in age to those of the participants being served by WIC.

In some cases this may not be possible. WIC agencies have the flexibility to develop criteria as long as the key components of the definition are included.

Lactation Consultants?

Lactation consultants, nurses, dietitians, and other health professionals are critical members of the health care team in supporting new mothers. However, they do not meet the definition of a “paraprofessional” in the Loving Support© Model.
They can contribute to the program in other ways (such as accepting referrals, providing training, or managing and supervising peer counselors) which is an allowable expense for peer counseling funds. However, the funds cannot be used to pay them to work as peer counselors. Refer to the job description for lactation consultants to examine the typical job responsibilities for IBCLCs working for WIC.

Peer Counselors Who Become IBCLCs?

Peer counselors in many agencies become so passionate about the program that they eventually become lactation consultants. When this occurs, an agency has several options.

As a new lactation consultant she can be moved into a different position with the program and paid a different salary. For example, she could serve at the IBCLC level of a career path program. In this expanded role she would operate under the IBCLC scope of practice to receive referrals, serve as the WIC Designated Breastfeeding Expert, provide training, and assist high-risk clients.

Recruiting Peer Counselors in WIC

One of the best places to find potential peer counselors is within the population of WIC breastfeeding mothers.

Peruse the database of breastfeeding mothers in your system for those who breastfed for long periods. This will help you begin to identify potential peer counselors.

Asking for local agency staff recommendations is often the best way to identify good peer counselors.
Recruiting Peer Counselors in the Community

When a search within WIC channels turns up few leads, you can turn to the community.
The most productive place will probably be your local pediatric clinic.
Health care providers may be familiar with breastfeeding mothers in their practice whom they believe might be good candidates.

The Application Process

An application process provides potential peer counselors with the opportunity to communicate their strengths and weaknesses. It also shows them that this is a real job.
It gives you the chance to get to know them better and assess how they fit in with your health care team.
The application should be simple and designed to gather basic information as a screening tool (see “Staffing and Supervision 2: Sample Application Peer Counselor”).
Avoid trying to find out too much about the candidate’s detailed knowledge of breastfeeding. Much of that will be covered in her training.

The Interview Process

The interview is designed to learn more about the candidate’s enthusiasm and character. It helps you understand her strengths and weaknesses, and identify her interest in sharing her experiences with mothers.
Keep in mind that an interview can be a stressful experience for any potential employee. This is the case even more so for a WIC mother who may never have worked before.

Open-ended Interview Questions
Open-ended questions create a safe environment for peer counselor candidates to feel comfortable sharing their stories and their goals. You might learn about a candidate’s ability to be a good peer counselor from her answers to targeted questions.

Examples:
Tell us about the support you had while breastfeeding.
Describe any breastfeeding challenges you may have encountered. How did you deal with them?
What do you most hope to gain from being a peer counselor?

How Many Peer Counselors to Hire

Many successful programs recruit and train twice as many peer counselors as they think they will need.

Some women are passionate about breastfeeding and seem to be good peer counselor prospects. However, they find they cannot handle the added responsibilities of being a peer counselor.

Some go through the training and decide that peer counseling is not for them.

It costs little to include extra people in a training event. Another advantage is that you educate more women about breastfeeding. Even if these women do not continue with the program, they will be another voice providing positive information in the community.

Determining Caseload

There are no rules for the number of peer counselors a program needs at any one time. The number depends on many factors, including available budget, the number of WIC clients served, numbers of women breastfeeding, and community demographics.

If the community is rural and spread out, a peer counselor may cover two or three counties.

If transportation issues are apparent, a separate peer counselor may be needed in each small area.

In an urban area with a large pool of potential peer counselors, you might need several peer counselors in key service areas or from
various ethnic backgrounds.

Best practices indicate that it is best to give a newly trained peer counselor a very small caseload to begin with. It can be increased as the peer counselor grows in her knowledge, skills, and confidence and becomes more efficient.

Tips to Help with Calculations

The following time allotments provide a general guide. The specific amount of time needed will depend on the peer counselor’s experience and ability, issues she is addressing with the mother, and the type of contact being made.

Telephone contacts: Including time for documentation, allow approximately 4-6 calls per hour.

Clinic visits: Including time for documentation, allow around 30 minutes per visit.

Home visits: Including time for travel and documentation, allow around 2 hours per home visit.

Hospital visits: If she is making rounds, allow around 1 hour per 1-2 visits. If she assists a mother having great difficulty, visits could be much longer. Travel and documentation would also increase the time if she is called in by the hospital or the mother.

Classes and support group meetings: Allow around 2 hours (1 hour class plus preparation and class-set up).

Start Small

Generally it is best to start small. As your program grows and as peer counselors grow in their comfort with the program, they will be more efficient at handling larger numbers of clients.

As your program grows, a natural result is more breastfeeding women. You may then need to consider hiring more peer counselors or increasing their hours to accommodate the growing needs within their community. A nice problem to have!

Now, I’d like to turn this webcast back over to Patti Mitchell at FNS for final comments.

PATTI:

- Thank you Kendall. As Kendall spoke about, hiring the right people to be peer counselors is an essential component of a successful peer counseling programs. Again, today’s webcast was a brief summary of key highlights of Section 5 of the management curriculum. I remind you to please refer
to the detailed speaker notes and all of the resources available to you in the management curriculum. 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.