

Overview of WIC Partner In-Depth Interviews

Conducted April 7 – 21, 2008

13 Interviews Conducted with WIC Partners

PSB interviewed 13 employees of WIC partner organizations, including physicians, nurses, nutritionists, social workers, supervisors and managers working in private and non-profit health clinics, government, food banks and other NGOs.

Partners are Positive About Food Package Changes

All WIC partners interviewed welcome the upcoming additions and changes to the WIC food package and feel that the new package more closely reflects the USDA 2005 Dietary Guidelines. They strongly approve of the new additions of fruits, vegetables and whole grains as well as the reductions in whole milk, juice, eggs and cheese.

“I think it’s really good because it’s going to go along with the main messages that the government is trying to convey to the population about reducing the amount of fat, reducing the amount of sugar that we have in our diet, so definitely the reduction of sugar is important.”

– Nutrition Education Manager, Food bank

“Excellent change because it is promoting optimal nutrition and it is bringing them up to date with nutritional findings about whole grains and low fat.”

– DDS, Bureau Chief at DHHS

Partners See Excellent Opportunities for Broader Dialogue on Health

Importantly, partners believe their discussions with WIC participants about the food package changes will afford unique opportunities for a broader discussion of the importance of a healthy lifestyle, of which healthy eating is a critical component.

“... For us as educators, it gives us the opportunity to educate and have a deeper discussion about it.”

- Nutrition Education Manager, Food bank

“We have to talk about the new dietary guidelines, we have to talk about the obesity epidemic that we have in kids, which is awful. There’s not a connection as to why the kid is obese and they don’t see the parents as the people who bring the food home and control portions and so forth and what they eat.”

– Pediatrician, NGO

“... that’s how I will be encouraging the mothers to fully breast-feed, and that they will be able to get more of the benefits from WIC if they are totally breast-feeding instead of giving both formula and breast feeding.”

– Lactation Consultant, Hospital Association / Breastfeeding

Critically Important to Communicate Nutritional Reasons Behind Changes

Partners advise that when WIC participants learn about the new changes, they should be informed about the reasons for these changes and why some of the items from the previous package are being reduced. Furthermore, participants should be made aware of the nutritional value of the new additions and how they will contribute to a healthy family diet.

“The only challenges we’ll see is that some of our patients are not used to some of the new foods so then they’ll feel frustrated because it’s not the food they like. For us, it’ll just be a matter of additional education about nutrition during pregnancy and life in general. I think taste will be an issue.”

– Health Education Supervisor, Medical Non-Profit

“I think with this change there’s probably going to be some trouble with the cutback especially with the eggs and the amount of milk that they’re getting. But they’re getting fruits and vegetables and whole grains, so I think if they look at the overall picture they’re going to like what they’re getting.”

– Program Supervisor, Community Non-Profit

Specific Attention Needed in Explaining Changes to Spanish-Speaking

One WIC partner elaborated that she believes some WIC participants – especially Hispanic recipients – will be confused because they have placed such trust in the WIC program and the previous package. Inadvertently, the previous WIC package may have instilled some unhealthy eating patterns by providing excessive amounts of juice, whole milk, etc. She also worries about a lack of familiarity with purchasing and using baby food among this community.

“The impact with the Hispanic population has been very dramatic in the sense that they feel that it’s a program of the government and they really follow the advice that is given. In the past I have seen the impact of these items being offered in the package because they sell that—they had to feed the juice to their kids and that it established the wrong dietary habits because of the sugar content.”

– Nutrition Education Manager, Food bank

Bad Habits Need to Be Addressed

Other WIC partners point to bad habits that need to be addressed among all WIC participants, such as the overuse of bottle-feeding and giving too much juice to infants – which can lead to tooth decay. In addition, partners see a need to educate portion-control, as some participants flock to fast food and “super-sized” portions.

“We try to encourage parents to wean the bottle from the child at age one... Sometimes we are taking front teeth out of these children at the age of one and a half and two. That is the most troubling problem. Again, by getting them in as early as possible, we are seeing kids at the age of one and pretty soon it is going to be at six months of age and we try to get them on the right foot with oral and prevention strategies.”

– Bureau Chief and DDS, DHHS

“If I could ask WIC to do one thing it would be to really emphasize that you do not put a baby to bed with a bottle or give a bottle to a baby sitting in a stroller. If the baby is hungry or thirsty, you pick the baby up, you hold the baby, give them the nourishment or the food they need and then put them back without it.”

– Bureau Chief and DDS, DHHS

Communicating the Changes to Participants

Partners believe that clients need to be better informed on health and nutrition, and that both partners and WIC need to work hand-in-hand to help educate clients and their families.

Partners agree that the most effective way to educate WIC participants is with a brochure or handout, which should be at the most basic level, in both English and Spanish. This handout should contain lots of visuals – clear pictures of approved WIC offerings – for the client. These brochures, they say, can be easily transportable; participants will be able to bring the brochures with them for reference when they shop for food.

“Many of the folks that we work with are from low literacy situations that they need as many visuals as possible to try to help them understand how big a serving size should be without it being too small or too large. If it’s printed material, certainly it would need to be available in English and Spanish and perhaps also in an Asian dialect because we’re starting to see more Asian families that need assistance.”

– Extension Agent

“Pamphlets are always useful and of course they need to be in the primary language of the client and just having those accessible to us without our having to pay for them because all federal and domestic programs are experiencing cutbacks and reductions and funding so we don’t have as much incentive to disseminate information if it’s not free ... We’re going to depend on the WIC program to give us those pamphlets.”

– Director of Head Start

“We’re a low literacy community, so we really need to rely on the brochures. They need to do a good job developing recipes with the soy milk and offering a list of places where soy milk is available. The materials should also be in English and Spanish and point to the fact that the new package is complying with dietary guidelines. We also need consistency of the message between the agencies.”

– Nutrition Education Manager, Food bank

Face-to-face interaction/information sessions are believed to be effective, but low/inconsistent attendance undermines the education effort. One partner suggests having Saturday classes as a way to boost attendance.

In-clinic viewing of an educational DVD is also an effective educational tool.

“Most WIC sites have a TV and a DVD player available. I don’t know what the time period would be, but for a certain time period before the introduction of the change, if you could have that DVD playing so that when they go to their WIC appointment they would have the opportunity to at least see that there’s a change coming.”

– Program Supervisor, NGO

“I know a lot of the clients sit in the waiting area and they have a TV, so maybe DVDs – this may be in place already, I’m not sure – discussing the nutritional values of the foods they’re going to be getting, and what the positive impacts are on their lives and the lives of their children as far as having a healthier lifestyle with more veggies, and fruits and whole grain breads in their meal

plan. It will explain how the new change is keeping their heart healthy, and decreasing obesity, the complications of prevention of heart disease and diabetes, and anything that may be impacted by being overweight.”

– RN, Family Planning/ Women’s Clinic

Cooking demonstrations are also mentioned as a way to help participants integrate new food offerings into their diets.

“One of the things they offer that I’ve seen is the nutritionists will do cooking classes; they will perhaps provide different recipes or cooking demonstrations using healthy vegetables and fruits, or maybe making healthy sandwiches with the whole grain bread – just a variety. Maybe having them interact and also participate in the cooking class, if that’s available.”

– RN, Family Planning/ Women’s Clinic

Web sites and take-home DVDs were largely viewed unfavorably because many participants may not have Internet access or the ability to watch DVDs in their homes.

“We’re in a poverty pocket here and there’s a very low literacy level and not everyone has a computer or access to one. It’s hard to believe but they don’t. We’re still dealing with families that don’t have running water in some areas.”

– Director of Head Start

Communicating the Changes to Staff

Interactive training sessions – in person or via teleconference – and printed materials – brochures and flyers – are believed to be the best ways to train staff on changes. Interactive forums are especially effective because staff members have the opportunity to have their questions answered, troubleshoot problems, and learn how best to work with WIC participants.

“In terms of education, I think it is important to make my staff aware of the new options, explain what the food package looks like, the positive nutritional values or why those choices were made, and why it was considered to be a better option than the previous package. I think the way to train them should be via the Internet, a video or through an actual training session...”

– Health Education Supervisor, Medical Nonprofit

“I know the WIC program has done a wonderful job developing beautiful educational material, and sometimes we use the brochures because they are beautiful, but it would be important to offer this material in English and in Spanish. Maybe giving us a training session of the newest materials developed and making the contacts with the WIC program to know who we can order these materials from to use with the community would be helpful.

– Nutrition Education Manager, Food bank