

Essential Staff Competencies for WIC Nutrition Assessment

Hiring and training qualified staff is essential to ensure quality nutrition services. State agencies may implement VENA with well-trained staff, whether paraprofessional or professional. Emphasis should be placed on developing the essential knowledge base and work skills necessary to provide effective and efficient nutrition services. Training, followed by periodic staff evaluation and continuing education activities, assures that WIC personnel maintain and refine their skills and have opportunities to develop new ones.

Competency Areas for WIC Nutrition Assessment



Competencies are statements of desired learning outcomes for knowledge, skills, and behavior (also referred to as cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains). When learners demonstrate a “competency,” they are demonstrating their ability to do something (i.e., they are showing the outcome of the learning process).

In nutrition assessment, competencies address a variety of knowledge and skill areas. Competencies are also specific to the environment where the learner works. Developing or selecting appropriate competencies should be based on factors such as job responsibilities and the learner’s educational preparation and experience. For example, a registered dietitian providing nutrition counseling to high-risk WIC participants will have different training and learning needs compared to a paraprofessional who certifies applicants. In developing staff competencies, it is important to consider individuals’ inherent talents and abilities, as well as learned skills.

Because the tasks involved in a WIC nutrition assessment are fairly standard among WIC Programs, the knowledge and skills required to carry out those tasks can be identified. The six competency areas for WIC nutrition assessment include the following:

- 1) **Principles of life-cycle nutrition** - Understands normal nutrition issues for pregnancy, lactation, the postpartum period, infancy, and early childhood.
- 2) **Nutrition assessment process** - Understands the WIC nutrition assessment process including risk assignment and documentation.
- 3) **Anthropometric and hematological data collection techniques** - Understands the importance of using appropriate measurement techniques to collect anthropometric and hematological data.
- 4) **Communication** - Knows how to develop rapport and foster open communication with participants and caretakers.
- 5) **Multicultural awareness** - Understands how sociocultural issues (race, ethnicity, religion, group affiliation, socioeconomic status and world view) affect nutrition and health practices and nutrition-related health problems.
- 6) **Critical thinking** - Knows how to synthesize and analyze data to draw appropriate conclusions.

More specific information about the knowledge required and performance expected for each competency is provided in Appendix D, *Essential Staff Competency Tables for WIC Nutrition Assessment*.

Suggestions to Help Foster and Maintain Nutrition Assessment Competencies

- Maintain a library of current reference texts.
- Develop a list of recommended reading for all new WIC personnel involved in nutrition assessment.
- Circulate journals, newsletters, abstracts, and other documents reporting on nutrition assessment topics.
- Conduct regular in-service training to review standardized measurement techniques and procedures.
- Identify individual training needs and seek training and conference events addressing those needs.
- Provide opportunities to attend local, state, and national nutrition training events and conferences focusing on maternal and child nutrition issues.
- Use informal training opportunities such as staff meetings and in-services to discuss participant case studies and reinforce nutrition assessment skills.
- Create reading circles to review and discuss emerging issues in nutrition science and nutrition assessment.
- Help WIC staff become stronger critical thinkers:
 - Develop exercises that require staff to use questioning to gather additional information about a participant's condition, nutrition practices, or beliefs. For example, if a breastfeeding woman participant requests formula for her infant, encourage staff to ask questions that identify what is going on with breastfeeding (e.g., fear that she does not have enough milk), or if there has been a change in her life circumstances (e.g., returning to work or school, experiencing lack of support for breastfeeding).
 - Use case studies that integrate relevant and superfluous information.
 - Practice synthesizing facts, analyzing arguments, and drawing conclusions.

Building Competencies through WIC Training

Training approaches that focus on the outcome rather than the process of learning are often referred to as competency-based training. This type of training emphasizes application of knowledge rather than just the gaining of knowledge. Learning outcomes are clearly defined, and each learner's performance is evaluated by whether or not they can demonstrate the outcomes. While the process is still important, it is planned and implemented with the learning outcome in mind.

Because many competency-based approaches incorporate independent learning or directed study components, learners progress at their own rates. Training activities are carefully planned to accommodate differences in individual learning styles and to ensure that learners acquire the skills, understanding, and attitudes needed to function in their specific work roles. Because conditions and requirements for performing most work roles are constantly changing, it is important that competencies be continuously reviewed and updated. It is also recognized that State agencies may develop different and unique training programs based on staffing patterns and service delivery models.

Identifying Training Needs

Staff training needs can be identified in several ways. Current training programs for new staff can be compared with the essential staff competencies and examples of performance expectations to determine gaps or areas for enhancement.

Clinic observation and monitoring visits are an excellent opportunity to evaluate individual staff competence with nutrition assessment tasks and procedures. State agency policies and procedures may first need to be revised to ensure that local WIC personnel understand the performance expectations. State agencies may want to enhance their clinic review forms to ensure that nutrition assessment skills are addressed adequately.

Staff surveys or questionnaires can also be helpful in identifying training needs, particularly when the survey questions are focused on specific skill sets or knowledge content.

Planning Training to Build Competencies¹

Many training programs are built around behavioral objectives. Although behavioral objectives and competencies have several similarities, there are important differences. The performance context for behavioral objectives is the education (or learning) environment as opposed to competencies where the performance context is the practice (or work) environment. Nutrition professionals and paraprofessionals must be able to do more than “list” or “describe” factual information. Competencies integrate the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains, resulting in higher-level cognitive skills and moving towards critical thinking skills.

Training generally begins with teaching facts and skills using a didactic method with tests and evaluating knowledge acquisition using tests and demonstrations of skills learned. Once the

¹ Chambers EW, Gilmore CJ, O'Sullivan Maillet J, Mitchell BE.: Another look at competency-based education in dietetics. J Amer Dietet Assoc 1996; 96(6):614-617.

knowledge foundation has been laid, trainees can learn to synthesize facts through seminars and other problem-based learning methods where performance is evaluated by projects and simulation activities. As training continues, opportunities for independent learning and performance in the real work setting are incorporated until the trainee is proficient with job-related tasks.

Training techniques must be matched to desired learning outcomes in order to evaluate the performance of trainees. The table below lists the most effective techniques to result in knowledge acquisition and skill development. Given a choice between two techniques, the best choice is the one involving the learner in the most active participation.

Matching Training Techniques to Desired Learning Outcome²

Type of Outcome

Most Appropriate Techniques

Knowledge

(generalizations, internalization of information)

Lecture, symposium, seminar or other classroom-based situation, video, debate, dialogue, interview, recording, book-based discussion, reading, and computer-assisted learning modules.

Skills

(incorporation of new ways of performing through practice)

Role playing, games, participative exercises, nonverbal hands-on exercises, skill practice exercises, drills, and coaching.

Attitudes

(adoption of new feelings through experiencing greater success with them than with old)

Experience-sharing discussion, group-centered discussion, role playing, case method, critical incident process, games, participative cases, and rewarding appropriate behavior.

Values

(the adoption and priority arrangement of beliefs)

Lecture, debate, dialogue, video, symposium or seminar, dramatization, guided discussion, experience-sharing discussion, role playing, critical incident process, and games.

² Knowles MS.: The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy. Association Press, Chicago, IL., 1980.

Evaluating Performance

To assure performance objectives are achieved, learning outcomes should be evaluated as an integral part of initial and on-going training efforts. Periodic staff evaluation and continuing education activities assure that WIC personnel maintain and refine their skills and have opportunities to develop new ones.

Different kinds of performance call for different kinds of evaluation strategies. For example, performance evaluation of:

- *Knowledge* requires demonstration in some way of what individuals know or what they can recall. Written tests developed by the instructor or by previous trainees can be used to evaluate knowledge acquisition.
- *Understanding* requires individuals to demonstrate their ability to size up situations, see patterns, develop categories, apply knowledge, analyze problems, and identify potential solutions. Simulation exercises such as role plays and case studies where trainees act out their understanding and insight in handling “live” problems are an effective method to evaluate understanding.
- *Skills* requires individuals to demonstrate specific tasks and have their performances rated in some way. Observation checklists are particularly useful for evaluating technical skills such as obtaining heights and weights.
- *Attitudes and values* is much more difficult and less precise. Role playing, reverse role playing, and decision making exercises are suggested strategies.

Summary

One of the most important strategies for assuring quality nutrition assessment in WIC is through the development of key competencies for all personnel who perform these duties. Identification of individual and program-wide staff training needs is a first step to help design training programs that build the desired competencies. Training programs for WIC assessment should focus on skill building and the application of knowledge, as well as acquisition of knowledge, and match desired learning outcomes to training techniques. To assure performance objectives are achieved and maintained, learning outcomes should be evaluated as an integral part of initial and on-going training efforts. Periodic staff evaluation and continuing education activities ensure that WIC personnel maintain and refine their skills and have opportunities to develop new ones.

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