

## WIC BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELING STUDY: PHASE II FOLLOW UP IMPLEMENTATION REPORT (SUMMARY)

### Background

The *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling Program was launched in 2004. The use of breastfeeding peer counselors adds a critical dimension to the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children's (WIC) efforts to help women initiate and continue breastfeeding. WIC breastfeeding peer counselors provide a valuable service to their communities, addressing the barriers to breastfeeding through breastfeeding education, support, and role modeling.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service's (FNS) WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Study: Phase I Implementation Report describes the implementation of the *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling Program in 2008. At that time, Federal grant funding for peer counseling totaled about \$15 million annually. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2010, the amount increased to \$80 million, and subsequently declined to \$60 million in FY 2014.

The main objectives of this report are to describe how *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling is currently implemented in WIC State agencies (SAs) and local agencies (LAs); and to draw comparisons with the program's implementation in 2008, when the last study was conducted.

A key objective of the study was to examine how States used the increased funds. Additionally, since the last study, FNS made changes in the WIC food packages, in part to promote breastfeeding among WIC participants, and updated its training

curricula, *Loving Support*® Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together, to reflect new science, learning innovations, and program guidance since they were initially developed.

### Methods

The study collected data via a web-based survey in 2014 from 50 WIC SAs in the United States and the District of Columbia [not including Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) or territories]. The report also used supplementary data from the 2012 WIC Participant and Program Characteristics Study to characterize the LAs receiving *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling funds.

### Findings

**Program Operation & Allocation of Resources:** The increased peer counseling funding enabled WIC agencies to substantially expand access to peer counseling services:

- While the last report found that about 46 percent of pregnant WIC participants were served by LAs with *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling programs in 2008, by 2014, 87 percent of pregnant participants had access to the program.
- The percentage of LAs across the Nation operating *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling programs increased from 33 percent to 70 percent between 2008 and 2014.
- By 2014, about a third (37 percent) of SAs had implemented the *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling Program in all of their LAs.

- The 2014 survey also found that 33 SAs served 75 percent or more of their WIC participants in an LA with the program.

**Role of State WIC Agencies in Breastfeeding Promotion:** More SAs reported efforts to make lactation consultants available to WIC participants in 2014 (60 percent) than in 2008 (43 percent).

**State-Level Administration of Breastfeeding Promotion and Support:** In contrast to 2008, where 96 percent of SAs reported offering the “*Loving Support*® Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together” training to peer counselors at least once a year, in 2014, 76 percent of SAs reported offering the updated training to peer counselors at least once a year.

This finding may reflect the flexibility FNS has given to some States that wish to use their own peer counseling training if they can demonstrate to FNS that its use is consistent with *Loving Support*® training.

**SA Guidance and Support for Program Implementation:** Although the guidance that SAs issued in 2014 was generally similar to the guidance issued in 2008, the study found some changes in the qualifications SAs recommended for local peer counseling coordinators and for peer counselors:

- Consistent with the 2013 Nutrition Services Standards, more SAs in 2014 than in 2008 emphasized the importance of International Board Certified Lactation Consultant or other lactation management training or certification for peer counseling coordinators.
- Similarly, more SAs in 2014 than in 2008 recommended or required LAs to conduct a formal performance evaluation of their peer counselors.

### **SA Guidance for Services Provided by *Loving Support*® Peer Counselors**

Overall, the areas in which SAs provided guidance to LAs regarding the services provided as part of their *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling programs were similar in 2014 and 2008. For example, the vast majority of SAs both in 2014 (90 percent) and 2008 (94 percent) gave guidance to LAs on the timing of contacts between WIC participants and peer counselors.

### **Data State WIC Agencies Collected About LAs’ *Loving Support*® Programs**

States are required to monitor their peer counseling programs, but they have latitude in designing their monitoring strategies. This report indicates that almost 90 percent of SAs collected information to monitor the program in the areas of program capacity, peer counseling services delivered, and the characteristics of WIC participants receiving *Loving Support*® Peer Counseling services. Among SAs that collected information from LAs on program capacity, about 90 percent collected information on the number of *Loving Support*® peer counselors.

### **Summary**

This study’s findings suggest that while guidance for services provided by peer counselors has remained largely the same, WIC participant access to the program has increased substantially. Also, the findings suggest that more States are implementing breastfeeding peer counseling activities that are consistent with the standards and guidelines set forth by FNS.

### **For More Information**

Epstein, C., Collins, A., et al. (2015). *WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Study: Phase II Follow Up Implementation Report*. Prepared by Abt Associates. Project Officers: Karen Castellanos-Brown and Joseph Robare. Alexandria, VA: USDA, Food and Nutrition Service. Available at: <http://www.fns.usda.gov/ops/wic-studies>