

Case Study of Father Engagement in Family Nutrition and Health Programs

California WIC Association

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Program: California WIC Association (CWA)

Program Type: Non-profit association supporting family nutrition and health programs

Geographic area: California

Setting: Statewide non-profit advocacy organization representing the 84 local WIC agencies in California

Focal population: Fathers in families receiving WIC

Initial year of operation: 1992

Main funding source: Local and state grant funding

Introduction

The California Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) gives low-income families access to supplemental nutritious foods. The program also provides lactation support, nutrition education, and referrals to other social services. Those who receive WIC most often include pregnant women, breastfeeding women up to 12 months postpartum, non-breastfeeding women up to six months postpartum, infants, and children up to age five. WIC participation is associated with improved maternal and child well-being and can help address racial disparities in health outcomes for mothers and young children.¹ Historically, WIC has focused on mothers, infants, and children. However, fathers, grandparents, and foster parents of young children can also play a key role in helping eligible family members obtain and use WIC services and promote positive family outcomes.

This case study focuses on the California WIC Association (CWA), a non-profit state WIC association, and its work to support local WIC agencies.² The goal of the California WIC Association is to advance the WIC program's mission of promoting healthier families. We also highlight how one California local WIC agency implemented strategies to engage fathers.

Father engagement refers to the purposeful inclusion of fathers (including those who are biological, social, resident, nonresident, and stepfathers) in program services and activities with the goal of improving outcomes for fathers, children, and families. Strategies to promote father engagement may include recruiting, enrolling, and maintaining active participation of fathers in programs, involving fathers in developing policies and programs, and integrating fathers into program operations.

For the purposes of this case study, we focus on how the California WIC Association (CWA) supports local agencies to involve fathers in WIC programming.

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Program Overview

The California WIC Program, managed by California Department of Public Health, provides WIC services through 84 local WIC agencies located in county and city health departments, community-based and Native American health centers, hospitals, and non-profit organizations. In Federal Fiscal Year 2020 (October 2019 – September 2020) about 880,600 individuals received services from California’s WIC program. The California WIC Association (CWA), a non-profit organization, provides advocacy, education, training and professional development, and communication to support California’s local WIC agencies.³ CWA’s mission is to lead California communities to nourish, educate, support, and empower families in building a healthy future. A key component of CWA is to support family engagement in WIC programs. To that end, CWA provides resources on supporting men and fathers, welcoming African American families, connecting WIC and early education, protecting immigrant families, and providing outreach materials.

Highlight the importance of engaging fathers and give local programs concrete guidance and resources

In 2015, a CWA-commissioned committee composed of local WIC staff and public health and maternal and child health stakeholders concluded that fathers often were not involved in WIC programing. Based on this determination and a review of the research, the committee suggested including both mothers and fathers in WIC programming and services designed to support mothers, infants, and children. This inclusion of fathers as a component of a whole-family approach would be beneficial for the family and lead to better outcomes for children.^{4,5,6,7,8,9} To help local WIC agencies shift to a whole-family approach and encourage father engagement, CWA developed a toolkit of tips, practices, and strategies that local agencies can use to get more fathers engaged in their services (Box 1).¹⁰

“It’s a bigger framework—if dad can be successful, the family can be successful, and the baby can be healthier and more successful.”
– Staff member

CWA offered a training on the toolkit to WIC program providers throughout California to promote an awareness of the toolkit and the use of its contents. CWA offers ongoing support to providers through professional development opportunities like conferences, events, and trainings, and highlights strategies local agencies use to engage fathers. For example, CWA offers an annual conference session on effective strategies for engaging men and fathers, and in its biweekly newsletters and biannual magazine, it provides other resources along with examples of how local agencies promote father engagement.

Box 1. Father Engagement Toolkit

CWA’s father engagement toolkit is based on a review of the work early childhood programs do to engage fathers. Developed for WIC agencies, the toolkit offers a collection of practical steps and strategies that can be implemented by service providers across different human service practice areas. The toolkit has resources on the following strategies:

- Engage and Train WIC staff on the Inclusion of Dads
- Make the Environment Friendly to Dads
- Communicate Directly with Dads
- Help Dads to Support Moms and Breastfeeding
- Encourage Moms to Include Dads
- Focus on Ways Dad Can Bond with Baby
- Include Dads in Evaluation Efforts
- Provide Dads with Opportunities for Peer Groups or Counseling



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Translate a commitment to father inclusion into action at the local program level

CWA's father engagement toolkit gives local WIC agencies a variety of potential strategies to use for father engagement, with the methods drawn from early childhood programs, including but not limited to WIC. CWA states, "There is not one 'right' way of implementing any of these practices. Rather, this toolkit will provide ... options and recommendations from previous program success." For example, one local WIC agency serving Orange and San Bernardino counties operationalized several lessons from the toolkit to engage fathers in their community.

Engage and train WIC staff on the inclusion of dads

"...applaud [fathers] for just saying one thing, and then one thing leads into two things, and then three things ... we have to acknowledge just a peep from them, and eventually a little peep turns into words, and then sentences, and then a whole story." – Staff member

The local WIC agency trained staff to acknowledge and engage with fathers when they entered one of their offices. In the past, staff paid more attention to mothers, who typically were the primary service participants. Leadership now encourages staff to also individually greet and make eye contact with fathers and ask for their opinions on their family situations and the services they are receiving, which helps the local WIC agency better engage and provide services to these families.

The agency also trained staff to routinely record fathers as caretakers in the WIC database. Recording them as caretakers in the database permits them to access services for infant and child participants and their mothers.

This makes it easier for fathers to engage in services without the mothers being physically present. Staff report that this practice expands fathers' access to services and reaffirms that they are an important person in the family.

Make the environment friendly to dads

The local WIC agency recruited male staff to increase their diversity and help men feel more comfortable coming to the WIC offices, which are typically staffed by women. Local WIC staff reported that having male staff increased fathers' engagement and willingness to return to the office to receive services for the family. These male staff also take the lead on planning father-specific activities for the agency's annual Father Appreciation event, which celebrates fatherhood and the role that fathers play in their children's lives. They help coordinate activities tailored to fathers' interests, including cooking demonstrations, games and contests, and raffle prizes.

"I have had a few dads come in and ask for [male staff] because they wanted to see another male." – Staff member

Focus on ways dad can bond with the baby

Staff routinely ask and encourage mothers to bring fathers to WIC activities such as support groups and nutrition classes. When fathers do attend, staff highlight ways that they can be involved in the family and bond with their children. For example, they educate fathers on ways to support nursing mothers and teach fathers to connect with babies by holding, feeding, and bathing them. At larger agency events, such as the Father Appreciation event, staff also teach fathers how to connect with their children by providing games and toys for them to use and encouraging them to play with and talk to their children. Staff highlight the importance of giving a child undivided attention to generate meaningful, healthy conversations.

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Lessons and considerations

The CWA toolkit and the local WIC agency provider serving Orange and San Bernardino counties offer several lessons for how professional associations can support their members' efforts to be more father-inclusive, with an ultimate goal of improving family well-being.

Professional associations representing human services programs, coalitions, and other umbrella entities can promote father inclusion

Advocating for the inclusion of fathers in services that traditionally focus on mothers can highlight the importance of father engagement at a systems level. Giving local program staff specific tools, resources, and guidance can help them in their work to intentionally engage fathers in services. CWA demonstrated its commitment to including fathers in services by commissioning a committee to assess their involvement in WIC programming. This helped CWA develop a user-friendly toolkit that gives local WIC agencies the resources they need to execute father engagement strategies on the ground.

Small-scale practice changes can foster larger organizational cultural shifts toward greater father inclusion in programs traditionally focused on serving mothers and children

Programs with limited budgets can still implement cost-effective strategies to include fathers in existing programs. Small-scale changes include encouraging mothers to invite fathers to participate in services, welcoming fathers when they enter the office, and having staff direct their attention and questions to both parents when they interact with them. Staff can change their body language to face both parents when speaking, and make sure there are chairs for both parents in office meetings. The toolkit also addresses how staff can engage fathers even if the staff's personal biases (e.g., their experiences with their own fathers or social/cultural biases) might affect their willingness to engage with men.

Programs can hire male staff to promote father engagement

These organizations' experiences highlight the importance of having male staff present when men come into an office that is otherwise largely made up of female staff and women. Male participants could be drawn toward male staff and open up to them (particularly to male staff who are also parents), which can foster ongoing involvement and improve outcomes for both fathers and children.

This case study is part of a series of three case studies that showcase how select programs implement father engagement strategies. Each case study highlights key programmatic elements of father engagement and shares lessons learned to expand the knowledge of programs working to improve child and family well-being. The study is sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The authors thank our project officers Amanda Benton, Pamala Trivedi, Matthew Cournoyer, and Emily Hopkins for their valuable guidance and contributions to this case study.

Endnotes:

¹ Carlson, S., and Z. Neuberger. "WIC Works: Addressing the Nutrition and Health Needs of Low-Income Families for 40 Years." Research report. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2017, updated 2021. Available at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/wic-works-addressing-the-nutrition-and-health-needs-of-low-income-families>.

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² The California Department of Public Health contracts with local agencies throughout the state to provide WIC services and benefits.

³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. “WIC Data Tables, Monthly Data – State Level Participation by Category and Program Costs: FY 2020 (preliminary).” 2021. Available at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/wic-program>.

⁴ Padilla, Y. C., and N.E. Reichman, N. E. (2001). Low Birthweight: Do Unwed Fathers Help?” *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 23, nos. 4–5, pp. 427–452.

⁵ Allen, S., and K.J. Daly. *The Effects of Father Involvement. An Updated Research Summary of the Evidence*. Guelph, ON : Centre for Families, Work & Well-Being, University of Guelph, 2007.

⁶ Martin, L. T., M.J. McNamara, A.S. Milot, T. Halle, and E.C. Hair. “The Effects of Father Involvement During Pregnancy on Receipt of Prenatal Care and Maternal Smoking.” *Maternal And Child Health Journal*, vol. 11, no. 6, 2007, pp. 595–602.

⁷ Karberg, E., N. Cabrera, J. Malin, and C. Kuhns. “Longitudinal Contributions of Maternal and Paternal Intrusive Behaviors to Children’s Sociability and Sustained Attention at Prekindergarten.” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2019, p. 79.

⁸ McLanahan, S., L. Tach, and D. Schneider. “The Causal Effects of Father Absence.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 39, 2013, pp. 399–427.

⁹ Martin, L. T., M.J. McNamara, A.S. Milot, T. Halle, and E.C. Hair. “The Effects of Father Involvement During Pregnancy on Receipt of Prenatal Care and Maternal Smoking.” *Maternal And Child Health Journal*, vol. 11, no. 6, 2007, pp. 595–602.

¹⁰ California WIC Association. “Engaging Men & Dads at WIC: A Toolkit.” n.d. Available at <https://www.calwic.org/what-we-do/engage-wic-families/engaging-men-a-dads/>. Accessed March 16, 2021. Please note: CWA is updating this toolkit in 2021 to incorporate inclusive language and additional materials for local WIC agencies to promote father engagement.