

# BREASTFEEDING PEER COUNSELING PROGRAM: STARTER KIT

*A Guide to Getting Started*

This Starter Kit provides you with a guide to what some WIC programs have said is the “hardest part” – just simply getting started!

Washington State WIC Nutrition Program  
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## Acknowledgment

On April 1, 2005, five agencies accepted funding to implement the Loving Support<sup>®</sup> Through Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Program. They accepted the funding even though it was considered one-time funding for new work and we had very little experience to draw from.

These agencies took the basic tools provided in the Loving Support training and built thriving programs. They are our leaders for this program and have generously shared what they have learned with other agencies that have since started peer counseling programs. This kit and its contents would not be possible without their generosity.

Sea Mar Community Health Center

Colville Confederated Tribes

Tri-Cities Community Health

Pregnancy Aid of Snohomish County

Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic

We also want to acknowledge Snohomish Health District, Spokane Regional Health District, and Puyallup Tribal Health Authority starting peer counseling programs in subsequent years and for their contributions to this kit.



“This peer program has been highly valuable for the Sea Mar Community Health Centers WIC population. Peers are available for support in evening hours and weekends when the office is closed. They are also able to connect with women experiencing problems much more quickly than the WIC staff who have very busy schedules. They keep bulletin boards up to date, share resources and information with other staff and serve as role models when they bring their children in during office time such as drop-in hours. ● ● ●

# Your Guide to Getting Started

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*Peer counselors are in a position of trust with new mothers. As a peer, they are someone who mothers can relate to and feel comfortable sharing their concerns.*

## INTRODUCTION

It is human nature to seek out people who share our experiences in life. The challenge of



being parents, especially for the first time, may make families or a single parent feel vulnerable and stressed. They may turn to their own mothers or others for help. If the people they turn to did not breastfeed or had bad experiences with breastfeeding, they may become discouraged.

Peer counseling programs provide a unique opportunity for new participants

to talk to peer counselors who have a similar background as themselves and who are trained in providing breastfeeding support.

Peer counselors add to the breastfeeding promotion and support WIC staff provide to participants. Peer counselors provide essential support for participants, especially during the critical early days and weeks of breastfeeding.

WIC's mission is to safeguard the health of women, infants, and children. Breastfeeding provides life-long health benefits to both mothers and babies. The use of breastfeeding peer counselors adds a critical dimension to WIC's efforts to help women initiate and continue breastfeeding. Peer counselors provide a valuable service to their communities, addressing the barriers to breastfeeding through breastfeeding education, support, and role modeling. The long-range vision of the USDA/FNS is to include peer counseling as a core service in WIC.

The goals of all WIC breastfeeding promotion efforts, including the Peer Counseling Program, are to:

- Increase breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.
- Increase WIC participant knowledge of the advantages of breastfeeding.
- Develop community partnerships to maximize resources and increase the effectiveness of community support efforts.

It is our responsibility to promote and support breastfeeding. The Washington State WIC Nutrition Program is committed to establishing effective peer counseling programs throughout the state.

## **The Loving Support Model for a Successful Peer Counseling Program.**

In 2004 Food and Nutrition Services developed a training and technical assistance project to equip WIC programs with a framework for designing and maintaining peer counseling programs. The management training "Using *Loving Support*® to Implement Best Practices in Peer Counseling" includes research supporting best practices for implementing and sustaining peer counseling programs. It also contains training curricula for managers and peer counselors. The [Loving Support Model](#) is the framework State agencies use to develop policies and practices under each of its required components.

In 2011, FNS introduced an updated *Loving Support*® Through Peer Counseling training curricula for WIC peer counselors. A few years later, both in 2016 and 2019, FNS updated the training curricula for State and local WIC peer counselor program managers, *Loving Support*® Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together. The development of these curricula was a result of a cooperative agreement with Every Mother, Inc., a nonprofit organization providing counseling and lactation training and technical assistance to healthcare professionals.

*“As a WIC certifier, I often wish I had more time to spend discussing breastfeeding during my scheduled appointments. I appreciate that we have peer counselors to follow up on the issues and concerns brought up during WIC visits.”*  
*Certifier, Sea Mar Community Health Centers*

## Overview: Setting the Stage for a Successful Peer Counseling Program

The purpose of this starter kit is to help you have a successful peer counseling program.

Each local WIC agency's breastfeeding peer counseling program will be unique. However, we know the following are key factors to a successful program:

- **Know** the program requirements.
- Get **leadership and support from management and staff**.
- Have a **budget** that provides adequate funding and **knowledge** on what are allowable costs for the program.
- Ensure **access to resources and breastfeeding experts** the peer counselors can turn to for questions or refer participants who have breastfeeding difficulties beyond the peer counselor's scope of practice.
- Be **prepared** before you recruit and hire peer counselors.
- Provide standard **training to peer counselors and staff**.
- Provide **on-going program support**.

This kit addresses each of the factors above and provides you with worksheets, checklists, samples, and other resources to get everything in place before your peer counselors start seeing participants. Implementing a peer counseling program may seem overwhelming at first. With a little bit of planning, you can have a successful program!

*“I was about to give up with breastfeeding, when my peer counselor called and walked me through some of the problems with my latch. I was able to keep breastfeeding past my child’s first birthday!”*

## SECTION 1:



## KNOW THE PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

*“I came to WIC to ask for formula because I thought my baby was too hungry and didn’t get enough from me, but after I talked with my counselor and got some new ideas to try, I decided to keep breastfeeding only.”*

## Section 1: Know The Program Requirements

Before you can talk to others about a breastfeeding peer counseling program, you first need to have an understanding of what the program is.

### Learn more about the program:

- **Read**, [Chapter 15](#), Volume 1 of the WIC Manual:
- **Visit** [USDA's](#) website:
- **Read** through this kit so you can start thinking about what kind of program you would like to have.
- **Talk** to agencies that currently have programs. Contact state office Peer Counseling Consultant for a list of agencies with peer counseling programs.

### The Loving Support through Peer Counseling Program model.

The Centers for Disease Control identified peer counseling as an effective way to increase both breastfeeding initiation and duration rates.

In 2003, USDA studied current WIC and non-WIC peer counseling programs. This study helped USDA to obtain a clear understanding of what it takes to run an effective program. Its findings were used as the basis for the *Loving Support through Peer Counseling* program, which is the model we are currently using in the Washington State WIC Nutrition Program.



#### **1. The Peer Counseling Program is a separate grant from USDA. Expenses need to be tracked separately from WIC expenses.**

Because the funds are a separate grant, any staff working in both WIC and the peer counseling program will need to do timekeeping. Which means every time they work, they must track the hours they worked in WIC and the hours they worked in peer counseling. This is different than the time studies you currently do for WIC.

Your agency will need to submit a separate line of billing on the monthly request for reimbursement (A-19) your agency sends the state WIC office. This billing process is similar to what you currently do for the Farmers Market Nutrition Program funding.

## 2. Peer counseling activities and funds are in addition to, and not instead of, breastfeeding promotion activities already being done in WIC.



When you start a peer counseling program, you should not decrease your current breastfeeding promotion activities.

**The intent of the peer counseling is to expand your capacity to support breastfeeding, not replace it.**

You will need to carefully define the breastfeeding support work done by current staff and what is done by the peer counselor and how the two fit. For example, if your agency currently has a breast pump program, the peer counselors should not be assigned

to manage that program or have assigned tasks such as cleaning, tracking, or taking inventory of breast pumps. However, they may issue breast pumps to participants who have been referred to them with any issues around using a pump and may do follow-up and support. Staff must also continue to be knowledgeable about breastfeeding and provide breastfeeding support to participants, including doing Breastfeeding Reviews when breastfeeding participants ask for formula.

The role of a WIC peer counselor is to **augment** the breastfeeding support activities that are currently being done by WIC staff.

### 3. Peer counseling funds may be used only to support the peer counseling program.

While it may be tempting to have peer counselors "pitch-in" and help with other WIC duties, the peer counseling funds may not be used to for WIC activities. For instance, peer counseling contacts with pregnant and/or postpartum participants may not count as second nutrition education contacts. Refer to Section 3 Resources in this

The program has significant advantages for the peer counselors. One of the most common benefits is that their own personal breastfeeding duration rate is lengthened as they learn more about the importance of breastfeeding and as they enjoy the support of breastfeeding within the WIC program. They also gain a tremendous sense of accomplishment and enjoy the reward of making a difference in the lives of other mothers. Since for many peer counselors this is often their first real job, peer counseling is a way of learning new job skills and growing professionally and personally in ways that change their lives **forever**.

document for information on allowable costs for the Peer Counselor Program.

#### 4. What to look for in a peer counselor.

Peer counselors should be selected based upon the following:

- Enthusiasm. This is half the battle; the rest can be taught.
- Communication skills. Basic communication skills are needed such as answering questions clearly and articulately. A peer counselor should not be afraid to speak up.
- Basic writing skills. Peer counselors will need to be able to document their contacts and the time they spend helping participants.
- Have personal breastfeeding experience and are able to portray breastfeeding in a positive manner.
  - Recommended: A person who is breastfeeding exclusively or has breastfed exclusively for at least six months. A person who has worked through breastfeeding problems is ideal because they can relate to others experiencing difficulties.
- Current or previous WIC participant. Participants who face similar struggles and can offer relevant solutions.
  - Nutrition educators who may or may not be current or previous WIC participants may also be peer counselors. However, they must meet the rest of the criteria listed in this section.
- Be from the community where participants live. Ideally, peer counselors should have similar ethnic and life-experience backgrounds.
- Language. Speaking the same language is vital. If your WIC staff are bi-lingual, you may choose peer counselors who do not speak English. If your WIC staff speak only English, you will need bi-lingual peer counselors to assure good communication
- Work history. A work history that does not include extensive medical, nutrition or lactation management training.
- Flexible schedule. A schedule that allows WIC participants to contact the peer counselor outside the usual clinic hours and outside the WIC clinic environment.

The definition of a breastfeeding peer counselor is a woman from the community with a positive personal breastfeeding experience who models and provides breastfeeding information and support for other mothers. Breastfeeding peer counselors help fill the gap in services after hospital discharge during those critical first few weeks after delivery.

## **5. Peer counselors need access to professionals trained in providing breastfeeding support.**

A peer counselor's focus is helping participants work through normal breastfeeding issues. Peer counselors will encounter situations they are not trained to handle. They will need to learn when and how to access a Designated Breastfeeding Experts (DBE). Refer to the WIC Manual, Volume I, Chapter 15 for the definition of a DBE.

## **6. Local agencies must submit an Annual Peer Counseling report and budget.**



This report is due by December 31 each year and is separate from the Annual Nutrition Service Plan and WIC Expenditure report. The information in the Annual Peer Counseling report and budget is used by the state office to meet federal reporting requirements.

## **7. WIC peer counselors can't provide services to families who are not on WIC.**

WIC peer counselors may not bill their time to the peer counseling grant when providing services to the general public. Peer counselors should refer WIC-eligible families to WIC and refer families who are not WIC-eligible to other appropriate services.

## **8. Local agencies have specific policies job duties for the program.**

Before hiring peer counselors, you will need to develop a number of policies for the program and scope out job duties and update position descriptions to address:

- The peer counselor's scope of practice
- The responsibilities of the Peer Counselor Lead
- How supervision and mentoring peer counselors happens
- How peer counselors are orientated and trained
- How peer counselors document contacts in Cascades

## **9. Local agency peer counseling activities are monitored along with other WIC services.**

See the list activities in the appendix that the state office tracks and monitors.

**10. The following questions pertain to requirements listed in Volume 1, Chapter 15 Breastfeeding of the WIC Policy and Procedure Manual:**

- Are all required written protocols for administering the WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counseling Program completed and reviewed with all WIC staff?
- Does the PCL, coordinator, or designated staff:
  - Keep training and in-service sign-in sheets for 4 years?
- Do peer counselor job descriptions reflect the criteria established in policy?
- Are peer counselors supervised by an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) or by staff who have other state WIC office approved credentials and training?
  - Who are the peer counselor lead (PCL) and supervisor (if applicable) on staff?
  - Do your peer counselor(s) refer participants when encountering situations outside their scope of practice?
- Does your agency have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with another WIC agency, or a third party contract, to share responsibilities related to running a peer counseling program?
  - If yes, do you have a current MOU or third party contract on file?
  - Does the coordinator or designated staff:
    - Review the MOU or contract annually to assure current practices meet contractual and program requirements?
- If your agency has contracted peer counselors, do they have a current signed contract?
- Does the coordinator or designated staff have all peer counselors, including contractors:
  - Review and sign confidentiality statements before seeing participants or viewing client files, then annually after that?
  - Sign a statement of issued equipment, resources, and client files before resigning or when terminated?

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*“The Peer Counselor Program has been invaluable to our clients, augmenting to our WIC program. There is difficulty keeping up with all these moms who travel back and forth in the 4 districts on the reservation. But the comments and feedback we have received thus far has been more than positive.*

*Many clients who are in the lowest income bracket would not be able to, nor feel comfortable with, going to a professional lactation consultant, should there be one in the county.”*

## SECTION 2:



## GET LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT FROM MANAGEMENT AND STAFF

*“The peer team is very focused on breastfeeding issues, so they are the champions of making breastfeeding the norm in the WIC environment. They keep interest and energy high in breastfeeding promotion, bringing new ideas and new thoughts on how WIC can provide stellar breastfeeding education and support.”*

## Section 2: Get leadership and support from management and staff

### Involve your management staff early in the process.



Meet with your management to talk about the program.

There are many advantages to having a peer counseling program.

Breastfeeding reduces health care costs, and peer counseling programs have been proven to increase breastfeeding rates.

Also, peer counselors provide unique breastfeeding services. Your management staff will have some specific ideas on how to hire the counselors, as staff, consultants, or per diem. This is a key step and should not be skipped.

### Get staff buy-in.

The WIC local agency staff play a key role in the program's success. Their support creates a climate where peer counselors feel valued as members of the WIC team.

Before starting a peer counseling program, arrange a meeting with staff to talk about it, and how to make it work.

#### Be sure to cover:

- **Why** the program is being implemented.
- **What peer counselors do** and their scope of practice.
- **Why** peer counselors have hours and location of work that differ from staff.
- How peer counselors can **help** participants - and staff!
- How staff can help make the **program successful**.
- How to make a **referral** to peer counselors.
- How peer counselors will **communicate** with staff and **document** their participant contacts.

Getting staff on board will ensure participants are successfully referred to peer counselors, lessen misunderstanding, and build enthusiasm for the program.

**Involve staff in planning and listen to their concerns.** Without staff support, peer counseling programs have difficulty thriving. Explain:

- Why the peer counselors work different hours and why they can work from home.
- That the purpose of peer counselors is to be a peer with the population served by WIC. As peers they share cultural backgrounds, language, and life experience.
- How staff can act as role models, provide guidance, and help with the program's development.
- How the peer counselors will help with promoting and supporting breastfeeding and what they can and cannot do.

### **Decide if peer counselors will be hired or contracted.**

The advantage of hiring peer counselors is that they are officially recognized members of the WIC team and, therefore, can get the same raises and benefits as other employees. Hiring also provides liability coverage.

The disadvantages of hiring include the challenge of getting new positions, possible restrictions on hiring part-time positions, and the potential for long lead times to fill vacancies. There may also be little flexibility in reassignment or termination if peer counseling is not a good fit for a particular person.

The advantage of contracting peer counselors is that, because they are paid hourly for their services, it may be easier to flex their hours to accommodate the workload. It may be easier to hire or terminate contracted peer counselors. Contracting provides an opportunity to develop partnerships with other organizations.

The disadvantage to contracting is that contractors may not feel like or be treated as a member of the team. Contractors often do not receive benefits, which may make recruitment more difficult. And the question of liability coverage must be addressed. If you plan to use contractors, be sure to check with your agency management about the rules for using contractors.

Even with contractors, you still need to consider:

- Writing a clear statement of work that describes the duties and deliverables, and the scope of practice (much like a job description).
- Determining who and how monitoring the peer counselor's performance and performance appraisals will be done.
- Setting up a system for timekeeping and billing.
- Educating staff about the program.
- Determining how the contracted peer counselors will operate in your clinic.
- Making sure the contracted peer counselors are well-trained.



## Figure out how peer counseling lead duties will be done.

Lead duties include training and mentoring the peer counselors, and may include supervising their work. Some agencies split the duties. For instance, often, the breastfeeding coordinator trains and mentors the peer counselors, and the WIC coordinator provides on-going supervision. For other agencies, one person is assigned the role.

## Start small.

It is much easier to build on success. Starting small allows you to nurture the program to be successful.

If you have multiple sites, you may want to start a peer counseling program in one site and expand as you and your staff gain more experience.

Although you may be inclined to start with the areas where breastfeeding is the lowest, you may find it is best to start where you think the program will have the most support from staff and others.



## Keep all the "ingredients" in mind as you start to plan.

*Let's step back for a moment and use our imaginations...think about what happens when you bake a loaf of bread.*

Before you start, you look to see if you have all the ingredients you need before mixing things. You may be missing something important – and if that is the case, you may go to the store, or decide to make a different type of bread or maybe something altogether different!

Using a similar approach, take stock of your clinic, participants, and community – what resources and barriers exist that would help or hinder a peer counseling program?

What is missing, and can you get what you need? Or do you need to think of a "Plan B"?

- *In Peer Counseling Curriculum, use the Assessment and Planning worksheet to help you prepare an inventory of resources. This will help you determine what you need to do and where to start your peer counseling program.*

## Section 2 Resources

- [Staff orientation PowerPoint Presentation, "Peer Counseling: Making a difference for WIC Families"](#) provides an overview of the peer counseling program for WIC staff and internal and external partners.

## SECTION 3:



HAVE A BUDGET THAT PROVIDES ADEQUATE FUNDING AND KNOW THE ALLOWABLE COSTS FOR THE PROGRAM

*Peer Counselors are generally individuals from the community with personal breastfeeding experience who provide information and support to WIC mothers. Peer counselors help prevent and manage common breastfeeding concerns and become a friend to mothers, offering support and encouragement.*

## Section 3: Have a Budget that Provides Adequate Funding and Know the Allowable Costs for the Program

### Determine your budget and get agency approval.

Develop your budget after reading over this starter kit. Refer the list of allowable costs in this section.

Plan to spend more administrative time the first Six months or so as you:

- Organize your program.
- Develop policies.
- Recruit and train peer counselors.

As time goes on, you should be able to spend less time on administration and more time (and money) on peer counseling services.

There are two sample budgets in this section. One is for the first six months of operation, and the other is for an on-going program. Note that the costs are estimates only. You will need to adjust the costs to reflect those in your agency and community.

There is no magic formula for determining the number of peer counselors for a given caseload. Most of the current programs wish they could increase their peer counseling hours. Remember to start small and then decide whether you can expand the program. It is easier to expand a program than to shrink it.

The sample budget in this section is the format required by USDA that you will use to complete the annual peer counseling report.

**Allowable** peer counseling program costs include:

- Wages and benefits for peer counselors and peer counseling leads, including time spent attempting to contact participants, counseling participants, attending training events, and other meetings.
- Travel reimbursement, including direct client contact, training, and meetings.
- Training, including salary of trainers and materials.
- Educational resources and other costs associated with training peer counselors and peer counselor leads.
- Computer internet access for peer counselors.



- Cell phones, cell phone accounts, email accounts, access to social media used by peer counselors to contact participants.
- Materials to educate WIC participants about the peer counseling program.
- Expenses associated with the recruitment of peer counseling staff.
- Furniture, cubicle walls, desks, chairs, computers.

Below are costs that are **not allowable** from the peer counseling grant. WIC funds should be used for these items.

- Items and materials for distribution to WIC participants and staff.
- Items that promote breastfeeding (WIC Breastfeeding funds should be used for these items).

### **Submit your budget to the state WIC office.**

We need this information to submit the required reports to USDA and to add funding to your agency's contract.



### **Meet with your fiscal/accounting staff to determine billing codes and tracking staff time.**

This will help ensure you meet the billing requirements if any staff spend time doing WIC and peer counseling and other duties (e.g., Farmers Market or special projects).

“When I was facing major breastfeeding problems, my peer counselor helped arrange an appointment with a Lactation Consultant and offered to come with me because I was alone and scared.”

## Section 3 Resources

- [Peer Counseling Sample Budget](#)
- [List of allowable costs for the Peer Counseling Program](#)



“This job position really gave me the opportunity to use the counseling skills I already possessed, however, I used them in a way I never thought I would. It was during these phone calls where I learned how to really listen to the tone of the mom's voice, the frustration, the sadness, and/or the happiness in her voice.”



## SECTION 4:



# BE READY BEFORE PEER COUNSELORS START HELPING PARTICIPANTS

*The research found that peer counselors highly value their training experience and believe it is crucial to helping them learn and become comfortable with their job. They especially value having other peer counselors present to learn from their experiences.*

## Section 4: Be Ready Before Peer Counselors Start Helping Participants

*You've picked a recipe, read it over, and determined you have all the ingredients. Now it is time to gather all those ingredients and get out the utensils that you need to bake your bread.*

The information and resources in this section are based on the experience of current peer counseling programs in both Washington State and around the country.

This section tells you what you need to have in place for a successful program. You can either contact us for examples or get them when you attend the Peer Counseling Management training.

### Do the paperwork

#### **Assure Access to Lactation Specialists.**

What will happen when a peer counselor runs into a situation that she was not trained to address – a situation that is beyond her scope of practice? How will she identify the situation as such? Whom can she turn to for advice? How and to whom should she refer the client for a follow-up?

Peer counselors need access to staff trained in providing breastfeeding support. These staff should be either IBCLCs or have attended a week-long course in lactation management and have experience in providing breastfeeding support.

The state WIC office will continue to provide local WIC staff regular access to lactation management training to ensure you meet this program requirement.

#### **Develop or update job descriptions if your plan is to hire staff.**

Sample job descriptions are provided in the back of this section.

#### **The Peer Counselor Lead**

The peer counselor lead provides oversight to the peer counselors and makes sure that all requirements of the program are met. The peer counselor lead assures that:

- Peer counselors follow the policies outlined in Chapter 15 of the WIC manual.
- Peer counselors are adequately trained and supervised.
- Peer counseling funds are used only for allowable costs.
- WIC staff who also work in the peer counseling program bill their time appropriately. WIC funds may be used to support peer counseling; however, peer counseling funds can't be used for WIC related work.
- Peer counseling activities add to, and not replace, current WIC breastfeeding



promotion and support activities.

- The annual peer counseling report is completed in a timely manner.

### **The Peer Counselor**

The peer counselor provides direct services to pregnant and breastfeeding WIC participants.

The peer counselor's job description includes:

- How to contact participants. Peer counselors must make contact with participants during pregnancy. Ideally, this is done as a face-to-face contact. After the participant meets the peer counselor, how will they continue with their communication? Will the peer counselor be expected to communicate via the phone, email, text, or other methods?
- Where will the peer counselor contact participants? Face to face visits at the hospital, home visits, at the clinic, virtually using a state approved video conferencing platform?
- What hours will the peer counselor work and how many hours per week?
- How to document participant contacts. The peer counselor will be documenting contacts in Cascades, so will need some basic typing and computer skills.
- The importance of assuring confidentiality. Peer counselors should also follow your agency's policies in this regard and sign an annual confidentiality statement.
- How to document work time.
- The role, if any, in outreach and marketing of the peer counseling program.
- Expectations on attending training, participating in staff meetings, and other office events.
- Other skills, knowledge, and abilities.

**Develop a contract or statement of work if your plan is to use contractors.**

In addition to the duties listed above, the contracted peer counselor will need to know how to interact with WIC staff, how to ensure client confidentiality, how to bill for services, and how to resolve conflicts and problems.

**Determine if liability insurance is needed and how it will be provided.**

**Develop any new forms you need. This may include forms for:**

- Staff to refer participants to the peer counselors.
- Peer counselors to refer participants to lactation specialists, or other breastfeeding experts.
- Documenting participant contacts and time spent outside the WIC clinic and normal clinic hours. Will the documentation support the way peer counselors track their time?

**Develop or revise policies and procedures.**

Review the job description of the peer counselor lead and peer counselor, and determine what new or revised policies and procedures you may need. This section has a list of required policies. You can either contact us for sample policies or get them when you attend the Peer Counseling Management Training.

**Figure out space needs and determine if the peer counselors will have access to Cascades.**

Do you need extra computers or laptops? Contact us and we'll send you a questionnaire. The questionnaire asks for information we need in order to meet your equipment needs.

**Determine how to get cell phones and how you will monitor cell phone use.**

Peer counselors must use agency issued cell phones.

**If applicable, develop an interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a joint peer counseling program.**

If you plan to coordinate peer counselor services with other WIC agencies, it is important to spell out who is responsible for what. An MOU will spell out those responsibilities. Having such a document in place will help you keep the communication lines open. The MOU should also spell out how to resolve conflicts that may occur. This document should be reviewed annually so that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and to update it as needed.

“I had planned to use formula for feeding when I had to go back to work, but my peer counselor talked about the possibility of pumping at work and walked me through all the steps, from how to talk to my boss to how to qualify for a WIC pump and how to use it properly. It is not easy, but I am proud that I am still a breastfeeding mother.”

## Recruit peer counselors

*You now have all your ingredients assembled and ready. It's time to turn the oven on and start mixing things together!*

You are now prepared to recruit your peer counselors. The check list below can help you have smooth recruitment.

### **Develop recruitment announcements.**

Recruitment can be done a variety of ways. Before you start, check with your 'agency's management and human resources to be sure you are following agency-specific policies. Discuss with management and your staff how to recruit from targeted populations, such as Russian or Spanish-speaking participants, African American clients or teens.

### **Determine how you will recruit peer counselors.**

- Post a recruitment flyer at the clinic sites where you will have peer counselors working.
- Ask staff if they know participants who may be good at peer counseling. Contact those participants and talk to them about becoming a peer counselor.
- Contact current or former participants who are currently breastfeeding exclusively or exclusively breastfed for at least six month.
- Work with other programs to help you identify potential peer counselors.



### **Develop interview and reference check questions.**

Check-in, as needed, with your human resources staff to get help on how to ask questions to get the information you need. Example questions are in the Peer Counselor Management Training.

## Get prepared for training

### **Develop a training and orientation plan for peer counselors and get a Learning Management System (LMS) account for them.**

Peer counselors need to learn quite a bit, so training and orientation is a must. They need to learn a lot about breastfeeding outside of their own experiences, how to provide participant-centered counseling, and when to refer participants to others for situations outside their scope of practice. They need to know how the WIC program works, agency-specific policies that affect their work, and what their role is as part of the WIC team.

Include time in your plan for your new peer counselor(s) to complete:

- [Loving Support Through Peer Counseling Training Program](#) curriculum takes approximately 20-30 hours to complete.
- Cascades training Module 1A-C in LMS.
- Within the first year of employment, complete the [Baby Behavior Online Course](#) and [Paraprofessional Breastfeeding Training](#) (and the anthropometrics online course if you

plan to have your peer counselor weighing babies). These trainings can be found in the Learning Management System (LMS).

- **Additional training** (optional, but encouraged) available:
  - [Baby Behavior Staff Refresher Training Materials](#) - scroll down to Modules 1-3
  - [Participant Centered Education](#)
  - [Participant Centered Services - Setting the Stage](#)
  - [Principles of Influence](#)
- Train on agency-related policies and practices, such as how to ensure client confidentiality, work hours, Civil Rights, where to park.
- Shadow staff such as the breastfeeding coordinator or IBCLC.
- Refer to USDA WIC Works Resource System, [WIC Learning Online](#), Training for all WIC Staff.

**Review the curriculum and determine when and where it will take place.**

The Loving *Support*© Through Peer Counseling: A Journey Together curriculum takes approximately 20 hours to complete. Determine how to organize the training that meets the peer counselors and your needs.

- The curriculum is based on face-to-face training. Call the state office staff if you are considering virtual training; the curriculum will need to be adapted to accommodate this type of training.
- Break up the training into manageable sections. Agencies with existing programs recommend keeping the training sessions to 2 to 4 hours to ensure the peer counselors are their most receptive to learning.
- Keep in mind that for some peer counselors, this may be their first training or class since high school.
- Also, you may need to schedule around childcare.

**Check to ensure you have the recommended training materials.**

The state office provides a toolkit with all the resources you need to train your newly hired peer counselors and a toolkit for the peer counselors going through the curriculum.

You will need to order items such as one 3-inch binder for each peer counselor and divider tabs (12 for each binder).

**Order equipment and supplies that the peer counselors will need.**

Equipment and supplies include the items the peer counselors will need to do their jobs, such as a laptop, cell phones, pens, breastfeeding educational materials, etc. We will make sure the peer counselor laptops have needed software.

**Print materials.**

Make copies of the handouts for the training, if needed. You will also need copies of other documents, such as agency policies and general WIC information.

## Plan a graduation ceremony after training is completed

For many peer counselors, this job is the start of their careers. Some peer counselors go on to get more education. Graduation day is a day to celebrate the completion of training for these young women. Make this day special. If you're excited about the peer counselors completing their training to help participants. They will be too!

Create and print up certificates. Invite your WIC staff. Have special speakers come in to give a speech. Decorate the space where the graduation will take place. *Have fun!*

### Trained peer counselors will have:

- Confidence in their ability to answer questions.
- Skills to provide appropriate and accurate breastfeeding information.
- Client centered counseling skills.
- Knowledge in what their limitations are and when to make appropriate referrals.

## SECTION 5:



## PROVIDE ON- GOING SUPPORT

*“The phone counseling allowed the moms who called, to stay home, and not bundle up their baby to go out and get answers, instead they did this from their own homes, which ultimately resulted in a happier mom and happier baby. I was blessed to have been able to be a part of this while working for WIC.”*

## Section 5: Provide On-going Support

Congratulations – your peer counselors are now ready to see participants!



The peer counseling program will thrive if both WIC staff and peer counselors receive consistent training and information.

Take a moment to get started on the on-going support.

### **Meet regularly with your peer counselors.**

Have weekly meetings with your new peer counselors for the first six months to make sure they get off to the right start and stay within their scope of practice. As time goes on, determine how often to meet. Continue to meet regularly.

### **It is important to provide:**

- A time to meet with other peer counselors to discuss and debrief on their encounters with participants.
- A time to have their questions answered.
- Encouragement to keep going when their calls are not returned.
- Feedback on how they are documenting their time and client contacts.
- Reminders on what types of situations are outside their scope of practice and how to make referrals.
- Program updates.

### **Peer counselors are a part of the WIC team.**

Peer counselors are a part of the WIC team and should attend staff meetings to be updated with agency and WIC policies and procedures.

## Provide on-going training for peer counselors.



Encourage peer counselors to attend regional WIC breastfeeding trainings, regional peer counselor networking sessions, self-study, attend La Leche League meetings, or other breastfeeding trainings and conferences.

Besides training on breastfeeding, peer counselors will also benefit from other types of training, such as stress management and counseling or communication skills. Include peer counselors in WIC trainings that address how to provide participant-centered services.

It is important to peer counselors understand how the WIC Program operates. You want your peer counselors to reinforce the information WIC staff provide to participants, not counter it.

## Promote the peer counseling program.

Inform your community, area physicians, hospitals, breastfeeding coalitions, and other organizations that you have a breastfeeding peer counseling program. They can support the program by reinforcing to WIC mothers the benefits of having a breastfeeding peer counselor.

Other ways to promote the program include having the peer counselors attend breastfeeding coalition meetings, mailing out information to community health care providers, and paying for their time and encouraging peer counselors to attend community meetings and conferences.

Soon the entire community will be buzzing about your peer counseling program!

“Most of the mom’s I had contact with didn’t just need answers, they needed someone to listen, someone who had experienced their current experiences. In short they needed to be counseled on some level.”

## CONCLUSION



### **Breastfeeding is a learned process.**

Breastfeeding success can hinge upon the information and the support the participant receives.

A peer counselor can tip the scale in the participant's favor by providing on-going support and practical suggestions for breastfeeding that are based on a similar world view.

*“There is a reason behind all things in nature.”*

*Aristotle*



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