

MN WIC Advisory Group January 27, 2020 Meeting Notes

ADVISORY GROUP (AG) MEMBERS PARTICIPATING:

Jessica Allred (Winona Co.); Nikki Bennett (St. Louis Co.); Amy Caron (Dodge/Steele CHB); Maggie Domski (Washington Co.); Kathy Duffy (St. Paul/Ramsey Co.) for Karen Mayer; Katlyn Hubbard (Becker Co.); Kris Klopp (Mille Lacs Co.); Amber Koski (Pine Co.); Miriam Lindblad (Countryside); Marlee Morrison (Hubbard Co.); Wendy O'Leary (Olmsted Co.); Stephanie Olson (Polk Co.); Arlin Penner (Nicollet Co.); Kathy Roycraft (Waseca Co.); Wendy Schoon (Otter Tail Co.); Ellie White (Kanabec Co.) and

AG MEMBERS ABSENT: Lenora Yellow Bird (White Earth Reservation).

MDH STAFF IN ATTENDANCE:

Kate Franken, WIC Director; Pat Faulkner, Breastfeeding, Training, & Communications Unit Supervisor; Rebecca Gruenes, Nutrition & Clinic Services Unit Supervisor; Carol Rowe, MIS & Data Unit Supervisor; Jessie Zins, Food Delivery Unit Supervisor, and Tammie Edmundson, Fiscal Analyst.

Welcome & Introductions

There were several new members joining the Advisory Group for the first time.

Service Area – Follow-up from LPHA Meeting

At the October 2019 AG meeting, Kate shared that the State Agency expects Local Agencies to serve participants wherever they seek WIC services, rather than being limited to the county in which they reside. Following the AG meeting, the topic was discussed at WIC regional meetings in November, at which WIC Coordinators suggested that Kate communicate this directly with local leadership. Kate attended the January 16th Local Public Health Association (LPHA) meeting to discuss it. At the meeting many said that their area has been doing this for years, and that there is agreement and coordination among the LAs to accommodate participants' preferences. The concerns voiced at the meeting were similar to those shared by AG members.

- **Caseload loss:** concern among some LAs that they will lose caseload, with participants in their county choosing to receive services in a neighboring county because the other clinic is closer. Some LAs might be more affected than others; and it is expected that there will be losses and gains. The SA will be monitoring this and will consider using a longer period (e.g., 6 -12 months, rather than 3) to forecast caseload and set funding levels.
- **Referrals:** Referrals are such an important and integral part of WIC services. LAs are concerned about how to handle referrals if participants receive WIC benefits in one county, but other health and social services in another county and effect on continuity of care – not only making appropriate referrals but providing a “warm hand-off”.
- **Staffing/Clinic locations:** LAs are concerned about their capacity to rapidly adjust staffing levels to accommodate drastic increases or decreases in participation,
- **Communicating w/ participants:** LAs requested that the SA provide “talking points” for phone staff and CPAs, and provide a “tool” for LAs to know clinic locations in neighboring counties.
- **WIC releases:** LAs have some concern that they may need to obtain multiple releases.

The SA expects/anticipates this to be transitional, knowing that LAs may need to revise local policies, materials, and websites, as well as staffing levels.

WIC Regional Meeting Highlights

Following each regional meeting, the WIC Consultants summarize the discussion and identify any issues raised. Rebecca consolidates the notes from the 8 meetings, which MT reviews, discusses and identifies any follow-up that is needed. Rebecca shared and walked through the summary document. Key areas not addressed elsewhere in these meeting notes:

- **eWIC:** There are two challenges identified across the state in the eWIC transaction:
Produce not being “mapped” and so it appeared to be “unallowed”. All produce is WIC-allowed, but some items need to be mapped, which can be done only by the store. This will likely always be an issue. LAs should let participants know about this and if they encounter it when shopping encourage them to select something else. If LAs notice a pattern (e.g., a store in which this is regularly a problem) – notify the vendor unit staff.
Midpoint Receipt/Confirmation Receipt: The receipt and process varies from store to store, and not all stores have a midpoint receipt, so if a participant is asked to “accept” the transaction, they should ask to see the receipt or work with the cashier to make sure they know what the WIC card is paying for before accepting. Vendor staff is developing training tools for cashiers, and a module for LA staff.
- **Dual Participation:** LAs are expected to monitor for dual participation, and Consultants discussed the tools LAs could use to do this. Coordinators requested that the State Agency provide clearer, more streamlined directions. This is being done - watch for information coming out in the Wednesday Update in February.
- **Education Choice:** Implementation of “education choice” varies considerably across the state – some LAs aren’t doing it yet, others only offer education by phone. The SA expects LAs to offer participants “Education Choices” to reduce barriers and increase access. It will be included in the next NEP. Consultants will continue promoting it and follow-up with LAs needing assistance.

Visioning: Envisioning WIC as a Relevant, Successful Program

This activity (begun in October 2018) explored what was necessary to make MN WIC a “relevant, successful program meeting participants’ needs and delivering quality services.” Over the course of a year, the group identified as the top priorities: streamlining administrative task; flexible program delivery; outreach & retention; and technology. The group decided to include as a standing AG agenda item, state staff updates on activities related to these areas.

Visioning/Technology

- **MN WIC App upcoming enhancements**
An enhancement planned for spring 2020 will allow foster parents or other caretaker (e.g., grandma) to register multiple cards in the app. User Acceptance testing (UAT) is planned for March 2020; implementation for later in spring. The LA staff *My MN WIC App* training module will be updated to include this new functionality, and information will be shared with LAs in various ways prior to implementation. Two other enhancements planned for later in the year are: adding Cash Value Benefits (CVB) calculator for entering quantity and price/lb to get a total price for a produce item, and subtracting that amount from their available CVB balance; and adding a calculator for cereal so that users can enter the size of cereal box/boxes, to determine how much is left in their cereal benefit.
- **SPIRIT Web Project**
This project is necessary to greatly expand the life of the system, as well as improve performance, security and maintainability. This project entails streamlining and rewriting the SPIRIT/HuBERT code to a browser-based application. A browser app will allow for flexibility in accessing HuBERT on different devices. Project is expected to be completed in 2022.

Visioning/Streamlining Administrative Tasks – Updating WIC’s Medical Formulary

State staff convened an internal workgroup comprised of nutrition and vendor staff. The group identified three objectives: 1) Simplify ordering procedures for both state & local staff; 2) Improve participant access to medical formulas and 3) Establish standardized criteria and procedures for determining what formulas to include or exclude. The group ran reports of our current “list”, to identify formula types and current usage. They considered WIC’s role in overseeing nutritional needs, and what was beyond WIC’s scope. The workgroup also looked at other State WIC programs’ policies, procedures and formularies. Based on all of that, the group proposes:

- Including medical formulas that address *allergies, growth and GERD*.
- Eliminating/excluding medical formulas that are *hospital grade, intended for long-term tube feeding, and beyond WIC’s scope* for managing (e.g., complex medical conditions).

Other considerations in deciding what formulas WIC will offer, include:

- Availability at pharmacies - of our “simplified list”, ~90% are available through pharmacies.
- Formulas covered by MA - According to federal regulations, MA (not WIC) should be the first payer. This not currently occurring in MN, so state staff met w/ DHS staff to discuss how this could be implemented.

Next Steps:

- Get LA input. The proposal will be shared & discussed at February 2020 regional meetings.
- Continue working w/ DHS to develop a process for MA to provide medical formula for WIC participants who are on MA.
- Communicate these changes with Health Care Providers.

Visioning/Outreach – NWA National Recruitment & Retention Campaign

MN WIC is participating in the NWA campaign, which includes print and social media outreach in Minnesota markets. The state WIC office has scheduled a webinar (offered on two different days) for LA staff to hear more about the outreach activities occurring in MN and about the LA Campaign Toolkit - what’s in it, how to find it, and how LAs in other states have used the resources. The webinars are scheduled for:

- Wednesday, February 26th8:30 – 9:30 am
- Wednesday, March 4th.....3:00 – 4:00 pm

Watch the Wednesday Update for links to join.

WIC Funding Updates

- **FFY2019 Close-Out**

After processing all LA FFY19 final claims and state agency expenses, we ended up with close to \$4 million for the end-of-year “payout”. (This is about \$400,000 more than we had for last year’s payout.) Part of our approach to determining how much each agency will receive, is to cover as many LAs as we can. As such, this year:

- **Additional grant payments:** 45 LAs will receive an end-of-year grant payment; of these, 34 LAs will have all of their unreimbursed expenses covered (up to \$142,343); and 11 LAs will receive some additional amount above this, but not all of their expenses were covered. Nine LAs did not receive an end-of-year grant payment, either because they did not overspend their grant level or because they are not able to receive or process a payment this late after the FFY ended. Funding letters have been sent and LAs should be receiving them any day.
- **Per Participant Rate (PPR):** Because the final payment balance was higher this year than last, and in response to feedback from LAs who participated on the “LA Funding Workgroup”, Management Team will discuss increasing the PPR for some part of the remainder of the current federal fiscal year. This would provide LAs with more grant funding *during* the year, but would result in less available for an end-of-year payment.

- **Funding for the next 5-year grant cycle**

Kate provided a handout summarizing the workgroup proposals for funding in the next grant cycle, which begins January 1, 2021. Final decisions are being made so that they can be incorporated into WIC grant RFP being posted in late March.

- **For very small LAs (<100 participants), provide a “base funding” level**, rather than funding them using “Per Participant Rate” (PPR) – because the PPR does not adequately cover their program costs.
- **For all others:**
 - **per participant funding will continue at a “flat rate”** (i.e., the same rate will apply to all LAs vs a “tiered rate”);
 - **set WIC grant level for a full year**, rather than quarter-by-quarter. This will enhance LAs’ ability to manage their program and budget more effectively.
 - **set grant level based on 6 or 12 months of actual participation**, rather than only the prior 3 months, to forecast future participation levels. This will smooth out variations in participation across the year.
- **Supplemental Funding Opportunities:** While not all LAs request and use supplemental funding throughout the year, LAs on the workgroup thought there should be a mechanism and opportunity to request additional funding if needed. Currently, supplemental funding is provided for Above Average Clinic Travel (AACT), equipment replacement, etc.
 - AACT: The State Agency (SA) is intending to streamline the process for applying for and receiving AACT, which will be incorporated into the next grant cycle.
 - For all other supplemental funding requests, the SA will provide each LA a flat \$2500 to use as needed for equipment, travel expenses for attending state-sponsored trainings, etc.
 - For other needs, funds might be available through federal funding reallocations and/or federal infrastructure funds.
- **Local Agency Annual Budgets:** The SA will request an annual budget from LAs as part of the SA’s regular oversight and monitoring of grantees. The budget will not be included in the grant agreement. Instead, it will serve as a descriptive and informational document.

State Staffing Update

- **WIC Consultants:** Ellie Tome, consultant for the Northeast Region, is retiring February 4th (see [Oct 2019 memo](#)). Mei Yeh, currently the consultant for the Southwest Region, will take over the Northeast Region in February. Replacing Mei in the Southwest, will be Lindsey Ahlert. Lindsey, currently the WIC Coordinator in Sherburne Co., joins the State WIC staff February 12th (see [Jan 22 2020 memo](#))
- **Deb Grundmanis:** Deb, WIC Operation, Hardware, Reports and GIS Specialist, is taking personal leave to join her husband in the UK (he is teaching in a small town outside of London). Deb will be on leave until late October 2020 (see [Jan 15, 2020 memo](#)).
- **Supervisors:** Pat Faulkner, supervisor for the Breastfeeding, Training & Communications Unit, is retiring March 2nd. Carol Rowe, supervisor for the MIS & Data Unit, will be retiring in early spring. Watch the Wednesday Update for information about these positions being open for applications.
- **WIC Communications Coordinator:** This a new position, that was open for applications in early December (see [Dec 4, 2019 memo](#)). Kate is in the process of scheduling interviews.

Other Program Updates

- **WIC Conference planning:** State staff have begun working on the Request for Bids (RFB), with proposed dates in late March or April of 2021. We decided on a 2-day conference (full-day/full-day, rather than a half-day/full-day/half-day), to offer the same/similar number of CEUs, with fewer overnights, and fewer days away from clinic for some. [Note: following the AG meeting,

management team received feedback from some staff about the clear benefit of the “half-day/full-day/half-day” format – so we decided to actively solicit input from AG members and if possible, the LAs they represent. This input will be summarized soon.]

- **WIC Program & Peer Grant Application process:** State staff are preparing grant application materials so that the announcement & RFPs for both the WIC grant and Peer grant, can be posted in late March 2020. “Letters of Intent” will be due April 8th, and applications due May 4th. As we have done in previous years, we will schedule a conference call or webinar for LAs to learn more about the peer program requirements and have their questions answered in advance of RFP posting. [Note: these were scheduled for February 14th 8:30 – 9:30 am and February 18th 3:00 – 4:00 pm and announced in the [Jan 29 2020 Wednesday Update](#)]
- **Self-Checkout – How’s it going?:** Jessie asked for feedback from AG members on participants’ experience using self-checkout at Walmarts. As announced in the [January 15 2020 Wednesday Update](#), Walmarts in MN were certified to allow eWIC transactions at self-checkout lanes, beginning January 16th. Many AG members, representing various parts of the state, said that the Walmart in their area *was not allowing* self-checkout. Jessie will look into it.
- **Grocery Store Bag Fees:** A new city ordinance went into effect in Minneapolis, January 1st and is scheduled to go into effect April 15th in Duluth, requiring grocery stores to charge 5-cents for each bag customers use (paper & plastic in Minneapolis; plastic-only in Duluth). In both cities, customers participating in SNAP and/or WIC are exempt from paying this fee. However, to avoid being charged the fee, WIC participants will need to notify the cashier “up front” (i.e., before they begin ringing up the WIC foods) that they are using WIC benefits – otherwise the fee will be automatically added, and to remove it will require the whole transaction to be voided and re-rung. See [January 29th Wednesday Update memo](#)
- **National Nutrition Month:** March is National Nutrition Month. The theme is “Eat Right, Bite-by-Bite.” Rebecca shared a number of activities that are planned: a Wednesday Update memo in February will offer a number of ideas LAs can use to celebrate; an updated Social Media Toolkit from MN WIC coming in late February; multiple social media posts from MDH via Facebook and Instagram; and a proclamation from Gov. Walz recognizing *National RD Day* on March 11th.

Preliminary Agenda for April 27th Meeting

- WIC Regional meetings: summary & highlights
- WIC Grant Application process
- WIC Conference plans
- State Staffing updates
- Food delivery unit updates: shopping guide; self-checkout; maximum allowed pricing; bag fees
- Medical Formula update
- Everyday Hero: review process & timeline
- Separation of Duties (SOD): How are LAs doing? Any tips to share?
- “Visioning” Update on activities