

WIC to Revamp Nutrition Education

Following recommendations of the Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the WIC Program will soon make major changes in its approach to nutrition education. The changes will entail dropping the 24-hour food recall questionnaire that has been a standard part of the WIC assessment for nearly 30 years. In its place will be a new assessment tool, which is currently being fine-tuned.

Speaking September 3rd at the annual meeting of the National Advisory Council on Maternal, Infant and Fetal Nutrition in Alexandria, USDA representative Donna Hines described the Value-Enhanced Nutrition Assessment (VENA), which will enable WIC staff to identify critical nutrition issues in each family. This will enable staff to tailor the educational message to each family's need. Although WIC's previous approach was supposed to accomplish this as well, the USDA has concluded that it fell short of the mark. According to the IOM, the recall questionnaires were not reliable. Moreover, WIC moms found the process to be tedious and less than helpful.

WIC is generally regarded as the premier nutrition program, providing education, breastfeeding counseling and prescribed food for nearly half of all babies born in the United States. Yet it has funds to provide only a 5-10 minute nutrition lesson during each clinic visit. "Yes, we would love to do more," said Patricia Daniels, Director of the Supplemental Food Programs Division at the USDA. "But WIC is reasonably well-funded now and we do not expect an increase in funding to do the job. What WIC will do is improve the things it can control, which is that 5-10 minutes of parent time that we have for nutrition education."

Sensible as that sounds, it hides a deeper problem: the effects of the funding squeeze WIC has endured over the years. As one member of the Council described it: "The clinics are too small, the staff is too thin, the time with each parent isn't adequate. So the emphasis has become 'get them in and get them out'." Amid sobering reports of escalating health costs related to America's epidemic of obesity, is it smart to limit WIC's nutritional input to 5-10 minutes a visit? Rather than dreaming up some new scheme to slow the rise in obesity, wouldn't it make sense to invest a little more in the people already doing the job?