

## HELPING FAMILIES

### Local WIC Program applauded for pandemic efforts

#### COMMUNITY TEAMWORK

fforts By Cameron Morsberger

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**LOWELL >>** The baby formula shortage, child hunger and healthy eating are major issues on the minds of mothers and young families across the country. In Lowell, one nonprofit is being rewarded for its efforts to address all three.

Policy officials from the National Women, Infants and Children Association landed in Lowell Monday afternoon to meet with Community Teamwork Inc.'s WIC Program and honor their work during the pandemic.

Lowell was the National WIC Association's first stop in the commonwealth, as representatives travel to different cities in New England to connect with WIC workers to recognize their efforts and support them in their mission to provide support for mothers and young children.

While there, Brian Dittmeier, NWA's senior director of public policy, and Noora Kanfash, the organization's state public policy manager, thanked CTI staffers for their work and toured the facility.

Participation in WIC programs in Massachusetts has surged since remote access

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From left, Community Teamwork CEO Karen Frederick, Lowell Mayor Sokhary Chau and National Women, Infants and Children Association Communications Director Tim Ward, Senior Director of Public Policy and State Public Policy

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The National Women, Infants and Children Association's Senior Director of Public Policy Brian Dittmeier and State Public Policy Manager Noora Kanfash visit Community Teamwork on Monday.

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**WIC**

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to services and appointments became available over the last two years, Dittmeier said. The state saw a 16% increase in participation, with a 27% increase in child participation specifically, and 94,000 women and children received enhanced benefits since it was introduced in the spring of 2021, he said.

The pandemic has proven that an “integrated approach” is the future for local WIC programs, Dittmeier said, and flexibility and keeping children connected is the best way to serve.

“We are an in-person program. We are moved by seeing the families and working with the families, and it has been a challenge to not be able to directly interact with participants during COVID-19,” he said. “We need to meet families where they’re at, we have to reduce the administrative barriers in accessing the program and we need to provide all of the options for phone and video appointments.”

Community Teamwork, a Lowell-based nonprofit that offers a range of community- focused programs and assistance, offers nutrition education and counseling for families with newborns. They also stress the importance of breastfeeding and eating healthy on a budget.

The Women, Infants and Children Program is a free state nutrition program that works to aid mothers and young children by providing healthy foods, making referrals to health care services and guiding families through breastfeeding and proper nutrition, among other things.

To participate in the program, one must be a Massachusetts resident, have a family income below WIC guidelines, “have a nutritional need” determined by the program and either be a new mom, have a child younger than 5 years old or be breastfeeding or pregnant, according to the state’s website.

CTI’s WIC Program Director Meghan Blanchet said families and children that have just one nutritional risk are eligible, and risks could be low iron levels, low fruit and vegetable intake, weight-related concerns or a multitude of other things.

After the formula shortage, WIC’s breastfeeding services came in handy — the health and psychological benefits of breastfeeding are profound and numerous, Blanchet said, and the “amount of panic and sheer danger” around the formula shortage several months ago deepened the need for their breastfeeding counseling and classes. She said she had heard some families were making their own formula, which is extremely unsafe.

That’s why WIC is so vital, she said, and she greatly appreciates the visit from the national organization and how they are recognizing the staff’s efforts to provide health care services, healthy food and emotional support for local families.

“Our staff have worked so hard and we’ve gone through so much in the last two years,” Blanchet said. “To just have somebody come in and say ‘Hey, good job, thank you,’ ... getting everyone together, it’s just incredible.”

Staffers at WIC helped supply women with formula during that period of crisis, placing calls to pharmacies and other stores to ensure they order enough formula for those who need it. CTI also loans out breast pumps and refers mothers and parents to international boardcertified lactation specialists if needed.

State Rep. Vanna Howard, D-Lowell, applauded CTI for going “above and beyond” for the people of Lowell and said she appreciates the organization’s strong partnerships with other programs in the city.

A former recipient of CTI's services, Howard said she is grateful and proud to see the organization continue its important work in the community and help low-income families in need.

"When I first arrived here in the city of Lowell, who was there for me and my young daughter as a young mother? CTI," Howard said. "We all know the benefits of the Women, Infants and Children Program, but we also know what CTI does with the WIC program: It's reducing poverty, and it's helping in equity."



Representatives from the National Women, Infants and Children Association and local leaders visit Community Teamwork's WIC Program on Monday to recognize staffers' efforts to help families in need during the pandemic.



An informational board features information on breastfeeding in Community Teamwork's Women, Infants and Children Program office in Lowell. National WIC Association representatives visited the facility on Monday to recognize staffers' efforts to help families in need during the pandemic.

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