

Moms Mentoring Moms
Spotlighting the Role of a Rhode Island Breastfeeding Peer Counselor
by Jane Francis, USDA FNS NERO Communications Office

With more than half of the infants in the country participating in WIC, USDA shines a spotlight on the important role of the WIC Program's Breastfeeding Peer Counselors.

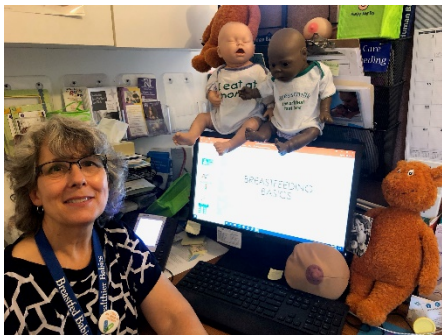
Hear from a Breastfeeding Peer Counselor in Rhode Island

In Rhode Island, mom of eight Elaine DeSisto, who is a State of RI licensed IBCLC, has been helping moms breastfeed since 1997, when she started her career as a Peer Counselor for WIC at Westbay Community Action in Warwick. She now works at Tri-County Community Action in Johnston, RI.

"When I was pregnant with my seventh child, my husband who is a baker, got laid off and someone told me about WIC," said DeSisto. "After my eighth child the coordinator, who knew I had exclusively breastfed each of my babies, asked if I'd be interested in joining a new program where moms who have been successful with breastfeeding can mentor other moms as Peer Counselors and I just blossomed into this job. I love it." DeSisto trained to become a Certified Lactation Counselor and has earned the highest level of lactation training as an International Board-Certified Lactation Consultant® (IBCLC).

DeSisto is the first in her family to breastfeed. "My mom formula fed and when I said I was going to breastfeed my first child, my mother was upset as she saw her role as helping to feed the baby diminished," said DeSisto. "But there are so many ways grandparents can support a family--taking the baby after it's fed for walks, changing baby, rocking baby and just loving on mom and helping prepare meals. You know, just being part of the team."

DeSisto said despite grandma's initial fears, having seen eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren happily breastfeed, it's become normalized. She's settled into her role and is comfortable with all the breastfeeding in the family.



As a WIC Peer Counselor, DeSisto is currently supporting 63 pregnant and 58 breastfeeding participants. "I always give out both my work and personal cell numbers so that moms can connect anytime," said DeSisto. "Sometimes a mom might be in crisis. I've had a dad call at 11:30 at night saying mom and baby are crying and he did not know what to do, so I had him put mom on the phone and we chatted and then we Face Timed to see what was happening. Mom and baby were okay. I just reviewed feeding cues and breastfeeding management, and reminded mom that baby wakes frequently and it's normal and can be overwhelming."

DeSisto said she's always taken phone calls 24/7, "because I have been there, and some babies are a little more challenging than others. I have lots of stories and experiences to be able to share with our moms."

Before the pandemic DeSisto did a lot of home visits with moms. Now it's mostly via phone or video call. Before reaching out to new moms, DeSisto does her research to find out if they are a prenatal mom or breastfeeding mom and what their goals are. "My job is to educate and empower moms so they can make a better-informed choice on how they want to feed their baby," said DeSisto.

"The Rhode Island WIC Program is fortunate, being such a small state, to have a Breastfeeding Peer Counselor at every WIC Agency," said Ann Barone, WIC Director for Rhode Island. "This level of care and rapport helps support families during stressful moments in the first few weeks after birth. During the

pandemic, Rhode Island WIC was able to pivot services to virtual contacts, which kept that same level of support.”

“I’m here to support their goals and to find out what I can do to make their life a little easier,” said DeSisto. “Their goal might be to breastfeed for three days. I’ve had moms who intend to breastfeed for a month, then keep going. There are times I’m there simply to listen. With COVID, families are juggling a lot, and I’ll stay on the phone with them helping to sort it all out. Sometimes they just need that social connection of speaking with someone.”

Dispelling misinformation is another important part of the job, according to DeSisto. “When you’re pregnant you’re going to hear all kinds of birth and breastfeeding stories from well-meaning friends and family, and I’ve also seen a lot of families turning to the internet,” said DeSisto. “Some of the information is just wrong. Many hospitals are not doing in-person birth or breastfeeding classes right now, so I direct them to virtual programs out there so they can have safe, accurate information without having to leave their homes. [Healthy Babies, Happy Moms](#), which is a wonderful organization WIC partners with in Rhode Island, offers free virtual support groups that we have been referring our families to. And they have hospital grade breast pumps for moms in need. I had a mom that needed a hospital grade pump right away for her baby with a Cleft Palate, and we were able, through this partnership, to expedite that resource to her.”

WIC has a language line to connect with clients as well. “I have someone scheduled today who speaks Creole,” said DeSisto, “so we’ll have an interpreter on the phone. It’s a great resource in helping us connect with families and has the added benefit of educating the interpreter as well and helping to normalize breastfeeding.”

DeSisto, who trains, mentors and provides guidance to all WIC Peer Counselors in the Rhode Island, credits her colleagues in the WIC Office and her relationship with Pediatricians, Midwives and Obstetricians with successfully serving moms and babies. “You learn from each other,” said DeSisto. “I’m not embarrassed to say I don’t know. And I think that’s what makes a good Peer Counselor as well, to always be willing to listen and learn and to seek help if you need it.”

Her experience has helped her build trust with moms. “I always tell my moms it never has to be all or nothing,” said DeSisto. “It’s what works best for you and your baby. You have to be sensitive to a mom’s decision to breastfeed or not. You don’t know what they’ve been through. I’ve had moms living in homeless shelters and in abusive relationships. Breastfeeding might not work right now. There’s always more to the story. It’s important to be an active listener to really find out what’s going on and how you can help. My goal is to make a mom feel she is the best mom in the world and be confident in her ability to care for her baby, regardless of how she feeds her child.”

“I ask open-ended question to gather more information,” continued DeSisto. “Some moms are pregnant unexpectedly; some have been trying through multiple miscarriages. Who is their support system? I ask if they are working or going to school. I’m trying to get as much information as I can to be sensitive to their individual situations and tailor my breastfeeding education and support to their needs.”

DeSisto points out breastfeeding isn’t just about nutrition. “While the antibodies in breast milk help babies stay healthier, breastfeeding is such an intimate, personal bond,” said DeSisto. “You are snuggled with baby with their little fingers around your hand, and they look up at you and you know you are doing your best to care for and protect them.”

“I feel very blessed because I’ve had so many experiences, not only personally, but through the families I serve as a Breastfeeding Peer Counselor. I’m devoted to these families and make myself available at any time,” said DeSisto giving the example, “I had a mom call when I was on vacation; by the tone in her

voice, I knew I had to call her back immediately. She had breastfed her first two babies for three years, but her third baby had a medical issue that caused difficulty with breastfeeding. I assured her that she'd be working with a team of people to get her and baby through this. I got her to manually express and put droplets of breast milk in the baby's mouth and gave tips on positioning baby and pumping. She was an experienced mom in a moment of shock, and we had built that relationship where she knew she could call me anytime. I always take calls from my moms; my husband is used to it and is very supportive. He's been the biggest champion of my breastfeeding journey."

DeSisto said she is proud to work for a program with the goal of serving families and giving them the very best. "My husband and I always wanted a big family," said DeSisto, "and I feel with each family there's a chance of paying it forward, building a network of mentors from one mom to the next."

WIC and Breastfeeding

A major goal of the WIC Program is to improve the health of infants through breastfeeding; WIC staff encourage and support a mother's individual breastfeeding goals and provide breastfeeding educational materials, counseling and guidance. Research suggests that breastfeeding lowers a baby's risk of certain infections and diseases, including ear infections, asthma, lower respiratory infections, diarrhea and vomiting, childhood obesity, eczema, type 2 diabetes, childhood leukemia or SIDS. Breastfeeding gives babies a healthy start in life. But it's not just good for babies—it's good for mom too. Breastfeeding can help moms recover more quickly from childbirth.

"WIC is a trusted resource with many moms and caregivers turning to WIC for information on feeding their baby, second only to their doctors," said Lizbeth Silbermann, Northeast Regional Administrator for USDA's Food and Nutrition Service.

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children - better known as WIC - serves to safeguard the health of low-income pregnant, postpartum, and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating including breastfeeding promotion and support, and referrals to health care. More information about WIC can be found at www.fns.usda.gov/WIC. In Rhode Island, contact the Department of Health at <https://health.ri.gov> to find out more about WIC services. For WIC breastfeeding resources, visit <https://wicbreastfeeding.fns.usda.gov>.