

Spotlight—the role of a WIC designated breastfeeding expert

We interviewed a designated breastfeeding expert in the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) WIC program to learn about her role in helping moms and families along their breastfeeding journeys.

Meet Rachelle Wheatley, from the St. Thomas, USVI WIC Program



Rachelle Wheatley serves as the nutrition program supervisor and designated breastfeeding expert for the Roy L. Schneider Hospital, Norre Gade WIC Clinic in St. Thomas, USVI.

While at Johnson & Wales University, Wheatley interned with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) in Virginia, where she “learned a lot about the program during my internship and knew WIC was the place I wanted to work. I still remember the first time I walked into the clinic here in St. Thomas. I was 6-months pregnant and asked if they had any openings as I had just graduated.”

“The USDA Food and Nutrition Service administers the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, known as WIC,” explains Lizbeth Silbermann, FNS Regional Administrator. “WIC provides a variety of public health services to eligible families, including supplemental foods, nutrition education and breastfeeding support resources such as lactation consultation, breastfeeding peer counseling, and breastfeeding supplies including breast pumps.”

Wheatley started off as a nutritionist for USVI WIC and over the past 10 years, has worked in a variety of positions and locations. “While in Virginia, I started working more with the breastfeeding side, helping the breastfeeding coordinator with education activities and creating lesson plans,” said Wheatley. “I realized it was something I really liked to do. Since I breastfed my child, I thought why not learn more, so I became a Certified Lactation Counselor and am currently working toward my International Board Certified Lactation Consultant certification.”

While working at the District of Columbia WIC program, Wheatley served as a peer counselor, providing new moms information to support them in meeting their own goals for feeding baby. Now as a designated breastfeeding expert for USVI WIC in St. Thomas, “I train our peer counselors and step in and when they have more complicated cases, such as when a mom wants to continue breastfeeding, but has a particular medical condition, or if the doctors are telling her that she needs to start tapering down her breastfeeding, because she’s going to be having surgery. I can teach about hand expression of breastmilk and step in and help moms do it.”

WIC Counseling Experience

When counseling moms, Wheatley says building rapport is key, explaining, “I greet all my clients and families with a smile and move the chairs around so we are facing one another; I never sit with a desk between us. I always let the mom speak first. I let her explain what’s going on and I’ll ask some questions to gain a better understanding. I make sure she knows her questions and concerns are valid. I think one of the better things is the fact that I breastfed two children, so I can explain the ups and downs. I can relate with being super tired and the difficulty of trying to nurse a newborn with a toddler around. The fact that I’m a mom too is the biggest thing in building rapport and a relationship with clients.

The first question we always ask our moms when they come in is what do you know about breastfeeding? We want to find out where they are in terms of their education with breastfeeding. Some already know they are going to do it. For others, it's not something that's been discussed in their household. One of the bigger challenges here within the Virgin Islands is that we have a lot of moms who perceive that they're not going to have enough milk. It's that perception of low milk supply because they can't see what the baby's drinking. If mom feels baby's not feeding enough, or grandma is telling mom the baby's not feeding enough, we'll ask mom to bring the baby into the clinic where we will weigh the baby, then have mom nurse, burp and change the baby and then we weigh the baby again. Typically, that will show the baby gained a little bit of weight within that feeding cycle. We also offer monthly weight checks where moms can just walk into the clinic with the baby, and we can get measurements to chart baby's growth with them."

WIC provides every mom handouts for feeding and hunger cues, and diaper count norms to make sure baby is eating enough to pass and eliminate daily. And WIC staff talk to moms about what to expect, as sometimes it can take a couple days for mom to start producing breastmilk.

The top barrier to breastfeeding, according to Wheatley is lack of education, explaining, "Breastfeeding is natural, not instinctual for moms. While babies will instinctually move toward the breast after birth, moms must learn how to do this. This is something that needs to be taught and worked on and practiced before you master it. Poor family and social support are another barrier. Moms need to know they have the support of their social group and family, because that affects decisions about and comfort with breastfeeding. Returning to work while breastfeeding and having access to supportive childcare providers will affect a mom's ability to continue breastfeeding. Even if your job is supportive of pumping, sometimes childcare providers are not comfortable heating up and feeding breastmilk to infants. And social norms play a role as breastfeeding moms can feel like they are part of a niche. Bottle feeding in public vs latching baby often feels the best way and when people think bottle feeding, they think about bottles with formula rather than breastmilk. "

Besides peer and lactation counselors and herself as the designated breastfeeding expert, Wheatley says, "All of our staff here are trained in breastfeeding assistance. We want moms to know anybody here will be able to assist them if they have questions. And we always try to make sure there's somebody here for hands-on breastfeeding support in the clinic every day."

"In the VI we are proud to say that our keen focus on breastfeeding over the years has made USVI the #1 State Agency in the nation for highest breastfeeding rates, with 61.6% of our infants breastfeeding based upon the *FY 2020 WIC Breastfeeding Data local Agency Report*. We work towards having all staff buy into promoting breastfeeding to provide moms with the support that they need", says WIC Director, Lorna Concepcion, who was once the Breastfeeding Coordinator and Nutrition Coordinator in the USVI.

Impact of the Pandemic/Baby Formula Recall and Shortage

Before the pandemic, Wheatley explained WIC clinics traditionally had a lot of group engagement with their moms. Many offered group lactation classes with moms in class several times a month, "to get lactation education and together share stories. That all changed with the pandemic when everything went virtual. I want WIC to bring back the in-person group classes because moms feel better when they know they're not alone. With the virtual aspect, we're missing that sense of community that breastfeeding brings. Pre-pandemic our breastfeeding community was stronger; it was more visible. Moms were coming into the clinic. We had comfortable chairs for them to sit and relax. We had snacks

and we could talk about things that were concerning them, answer their questions and then new moms could meet old moms and our peer moms and you know, counsel these younger moms and about the stages that were there about to go through and exchange numbers.”

With the pandemic, Wheatley explained things have shifted more toward social media and peer counselors are doing a lot more foot work in terms of calling moms and reaching out.

“Now, with this formula recall and shortage, it's been stressful,” said Wheatley. “At first we weren’t feeling it, but now ships are coming late and it’s harder to find. There’s shaming that’s been happening on social media. WIC is out there saying don’t bash moms if they need formula; not everybody can breastfeed. We’ve been working to make sure our messages have been inclusive to all our moms.”

Given the formula recall and shortage, WIC staff have been reaching out to prenatal moms to discuss the situation and the options around formula and breastfeeding. “We’ve been sending them breastfeeding education videos and doing video chats to answer their questions,” said Wheatley. “More moms are thinking about breastfeeding and WIC staff have stepped up to be more accessible to our moms, even in the evening or the weekends. We are beginning to see slightly higher breastfeeding initiation and retention rates and less solely formula fed.” According to Concepcion, “our rates have climbed this year now to an average of 72% of our infants breastfeeding.”

Wheatley said it makes her happy to know the work she is doing and interested in means something to others, giving the example, “I had a breastfeeding mom whose doctor wanted to her to start supplementing with formula because the baby wasn't gaining weight quickly enough. She wanted to exclusively breastfeed, so the doctor gave her a month to get the baby’s weight up. I worked through a schedule with her, and we talked with her boss and made sure they were agreeable about her break time so she could nurse. By the end of that month, with all of tips and the tricks that we did with her, the baby was starting to gain weight again. Mom was so happy and thankful that she didn’t have to supplement.”

WIC Has the Answers and Resources

Wheatley says her favorite thing about being a designated breastfeeding expert in the WIC program is “knowing that people will come to me for answers because they know I will be able to guide them in the right direction. I’ve been chosen for this position, and while I know in my wisdom that I don’t know everything, I am proud enough to admit that and I’ll do the extra work to find that answer for them. I will make sure that a mom gets the information she needs.

I want people to know that WIC should be their first stop for breastfeeding education. It doesn't matter where you are. We know the other breastfeeding partners, if you need more assistance than we can provide, WIC will provide you referrals. I hope a lot more moms come to us for breastfeeding support. Your WIC community is here to help, you don’t have to do it alone.”

Find out more and reach out to USVI WIC at <https://doh.vi.gov/programs/women-infants-and-children-0>. WIC is funded by the USDA and administered through the Virgin Islands Department of Health.