



*Transcript from USDA Deputy Under Secretary for FNCS Remarks on 2021 Breastfeeding of Excellence Awards*

Hello, I'm Stacy Dean, USDA's Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services. I'm so excited to kick off your 2021 Breastfeeding Excellence Award Celebration. The theme for breastfeeding month this year is Every Step of the Way, which speaks to the continuity of care that's needed through every baby's feeding journey. This theme references the visible helpers like the local WIC agency breastfeeding peer counselors, dads, grandmas, and other personal supporters, as well as those behind the scenes--local, state and federal WIC staff whose work, while often unseen, is essential for moms and babies on the breastfeeding journey. The highly trained nutrition experts at the local agencies situated throughout the nation provide WIC participants assistance through their WIC journey.

New moms overcome challenges and hit milestones with personalized assistance from breastfeeding peer counselors. Those counselors empower others from having paved their own similar path. Building upon the unique relationships program staff have with participants, families receive access to crucial resources through WIC's connection with its community. Families share important concerns impacting them, allowing agencies to ensure referrals are crafted to meet their specific needs. The extensive collaborations between WIC and local partners form the backbone of resources that support each community.

WIC is regarded as one of the leading public health programs because of its many strengths. Local, state and federal staff fight for breastfeeding rights, providing training and guidance, collect data and collaborate with other agencies, departments and organizations so that every American family receives the individualized support that they want. WIC ensures that at-risk families are supported from the time

a pregnant woman enrolls in the program until that child turns five. Local agency staff and participants build relationships that allow societal inequities to be addressed and equalized.

WIC is also one of the most powerful public health interventions available to reduce stark racial disparities in maternal and child health outcomes. USDA, and the Biden Harris Administration are committed to helping more WIC eligible families access program benefits. And we are committed to investing additional resources to help reach all families who need the program, as well as retain participation so that American moms and children receive the maximum health benefits that will strengthen our country and help to right the inequity scale. Increased and sustained participation will maximize the programs' benefits for this particularly vulnerable population and help America's youngest children get a healthy start.

In 2021, there were 132 local agencies who applied for a WIC Breastfeeding Award of Excellence. This year's awardees represent 31 states as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. As part of the celebration for the World Breastfeeding Week, 101 WIC local agencies will receive Breastfeeding Awards of Excellence in 2021--- 90 gold awards, 10 premiere awards, and one elite award. I applaud the effort and hard work that has gone into creating exemplary breastfeeding programs and the dedication that each of these agencies has demonstrated to achieve this level of recognition. These award-winning programs, your award-winning programs, ensure moms receive customized support to breastfeed and nurse their babies their way and meet their own goals, which ultimately creates a healthier and more empowered America.