

Lisa Richards, MS, RD, New Hampshire WIC Nutrition Services Manager Increasing Nutrition Counseling Skills in New Hampshire

About New Hampshire's Project

In 2013, Lisa Richards, MS, RD, New Hampshire's WIC Nutrition Services Manager, and her state WIC and MCH colleagues were concerned about the increasing rates of overweight and obesity in women of childbearing age. They were specifically concerned about these women's pre-pregnancy weight status and their weight gain during pregnancy. The Pregnancy Nutrition Surveillance System (PNSS) revealed that in 2011 51.9 percent of the women served by the New Hampshire WIC program were overweight or obese before they became pregnant. Moreover, 53.3 percent of the women in the WIC program gained more weight during pregnancy than recommended by the Institute of Medicine.

To begin to address this alarming trend, Lisa and her colleagues sought to increase the nutrition counseling skills of professional staff working in MCH-funded community health centers and home visiting programs.

The team decided to organize a training conference for the professional staff. They targeted nurses, nutritionists, medical assistants, social workers and home visitors working in community health centers, state-funded home visiting programs, and primary care centers to attend. Through the training, the organizers wanted the staff to be able to:

- Discuss with clients how pre-pregnancy and pregnancy weight gain are associated with childhood obesity.
- Identify emotions that lead to or prevent behavior change.
- Determine what emotional "hot buttons" can be powerful in delivering health messages and the best way to deliver those messages.

The training was funded by a Blueprint Collaborative mini-grant from the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists (ASPHN).

The training, held June 18, 2013, was called Moving Moms to Behavior Change: Hot Button Counseling Training. Pam McCarthy, MS, RD was the keynote speaker. Ms. McCarthy is nationally known for developing nutrition messages, materials and programs that use emotion-based "pulse points" to touch people's hearts and minds and lead them to healthy behavior change.



Pictured (from left to right): Audrey Knight, MCH Nurse Consultant; Lissa Sirois, WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator; Lisa Richards, WIC Nutrition Services Manager; Jill Fournier, MCH Nurse Consultant; Frances McLaughlin, WIC Nutrition Coordinator

About Lisa

Lisa has been with the New Hampshire WIC program for 29 years. She says, "I have seen so many changes in WIC and public health nutrition, from great improvements in the nutrition education and counseling we provide in WIC, to coordination with partners such as Head Start and Medicaid and Home Visiting Programs, to changes in WIC foods to include fruits and vegetables and whole grains."

In her free time, Lisa enjoys gardening, cooking, reading and traveling! She looks forward to spending two weeks every summer on a small Maine island in a house with no electricity and no cars where she reads and hikes and enjoys seafood. Lisa's husband Douglas is a retired social worker, and her daughter Laura attends the University of Virginia.

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The presentation focused on fourteen hot buttons including:

- **The excitement of discovery** and surprising people with new information that gives them with new ways to control their lives.
- **The desire for fun** and creating fun and humor to make parents' lives more enjoyable and stimulating.
- **The desire for self-achievement**, encouraging clients to achieve their dreams and rewarding their steps in progress.

Outcomes and Successes

Approximately 90 staff attended the Hot Button Counseling training, including professional staff from WIC, community health centers, home visiting programs, Head Start, Cooperative Extension and area hospitals. Attendees found the training informative and engaging. One participant said, "The trainer gave us many take home messages with good examples of emotion-based counseling."

Attendees also wrote these responses:

How is this training like or not like fruit salad?

"Lots of different components. It was interesting to analyze and break down case studies. This will help as I meet with moms."

How was this training like or not like pepperoni pizza?

"It was like a pizza because it was warm, got down to feelings, and emotions."

"It has layers, and each layer contributed to the enjoyable whole. It was fun and interactive, mixing together and learning from each other."

The New Hampshire team checked in with the attendees one month after the training and asked them how they were implementing the concepts they learned in their work with pregnant women. Although only 24 staff responded to the survey, the results were very positive. Seventy-one percent of the respondents said that they always or frequently feel more comfortable using emotion-based counseling. Two-thirds said that they always or frequently are able to discuss pre-natal weight gain with confidence, and 75 percent indicated that they always or frequently feel more skilled at moving women to action.

The foundation of this approach to behavior change is to make emotional connections, and, Lisa says, "Our staff need the same kind of approach." WIC managers reinforce the concepts with the home visit staff through informal conversations as well as evaluations and site visits. "We provide positive reinforcement to the staff to continue using the tools and techniques they learned at the workshop." She says. "We want the staff to feel that they are truly making a difference."

"Since the training, I have been telling mothers a lot more that they are good moms, and I've seen how much they have needed to hear that. A woman pregnant with her first child came to see me. She was discouraged that her doctor told her she wasn't gaining enough weight, despite her efforts to change her diet to eat healthy, higher calorie foods. She felt like she had a negative start with her pregnancy. I charted her weight, and I found that she really couldn't have been doing better with her weight gain. I told her she hasn't even had this baby yet, and I couldn't emphasize enough what a great mom she already is. She thanked me and she left much less anxious about her pregnancy."

– Trish, WIC nutritionist

Lessons Learned

Lisa and her WIC and MCH colleagues compiled a great list of lessons learned and advice for others:

- Remember that trainings are one-time events. It is critical to plan ways to build from the momentum created at the training and provide ongoing support to the staff. Social networking can be a great way to stay connected.
- It was important to reach outside our regular audiences for conference attendees and to include partners such as Head Start and University Cooperative Extension. Although Lisa found it difficult to attract participants from the private sector, she felt that inviting these staff was a good way to get the public health name and message out.
- When planning a training for mixed audiences, keep in mind that some programs, like WIC, can more easily require staff to attend trainings than other programs, like MCH.
- And, keep in mind that attendees will come into the training with a broad range of prior knowledge on the topic.
- Be sure that everyone on the project planning committee has a responsibility so that everyone is invested in the project.
- Bringing WIC and MCH program staff together is a natural collaboration, as the two programs work with the same clients. It is important that staff in the two programs deliver consistent nutrition messages in their counseling work.

The Important Role of the Public Health Nutritionist

Lisa brought to the project her experience and knowledge as well as a broad perspective on the issues as a public health nutritionist. She said, "Public health nutritionists in WIC have so many skills that are vital to the success of projects such as this one. We know how to assess the counseling skills of our staff to help them more effectively lead mothers to behavior change, and we know how to develop creative ways to incorporate feelings and emotions into the health-related behavior changes."

ASPHN in Action

ASPHN is a non-profit membership organization that provides state and national leadership on food and nutrition policy, programs and services aimed at improving the health of our population. Our vision is to create new environmental norms where healthy eating and active living are the easy and natural choices for all Americans.

At ASPHN, we build our members' skills as public health nutritionists by providing key resources and professional development. Funding from our Association's Blueprint Collaborative mini-grant program helped Lisa, an ASPHN member, launch the breastfeeding training project in New Hampshire.

To learn more about ASPHN, please visit us on the web at www.asphn.org.



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