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Nutrition Paraprofessional Staff in WIC: Findings from Policy Document Analysis

ASPHN MCH Council



WIC POPS

Professional Opportunities for
Paraprofessional Staff in WIC

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Research findings and the content of this presentation are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the United States Department of Agriculture, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, or the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). NIFA and FNS are working collaboratively on the WIC Workforce Development Initiative.



Agenda

- 1 Description of WIC POPS Project
- 2 Project Rationale
- 3 Document Analysis Process and Findings
- 4 Next Steps

WIC POPS Description



What is WIC POPS?

- 5 year cooperative agreement
- Part of WIC Workforce Development Initiative

PURPOSE

1. Synthesize current WIC paraprofessional staffing models and training and identify strengths and areas of improvement.
2. Build WIC workforce capacity by developing and evaluating training resources that are aligned with paraprofessional career pathways.



Project Rationale



Workforce Shortages in Community Nutrition

- High prevalence of **nutrition-related chronic disease**
- Shortage of registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) practicing community nutrition, especially in rural areas
- Workforce separation (occurring since early 2000s)
 - **Fewer RDNs means staff without these credentials are needed to provide nutrition education and services**
 - Frees up RDNs to provide services for those with complex conditions and needs

What are Paraprofessionals?

A paraprofessional is “*a person to whom a particular aspect of a professional task is delegated but who is not licensed to practice as a fully qualified professional*” -Webster Dictionary

Characteristics of paraprofessional practice:

- Receive on-the-job training specific to their role
- Supervised by a licensed professional
- Often come from the communities that they serve
- Some have been recipients of the services that they now provide



Paraprofessional Training and Certification

- No uniform interpretation or implementation of WIC paraprofessional
- Current WIC Nutrition Services Standards **do not define or describe any specific paraprofessional or Nutrition and Dietetics Technician, Registered (NDTR) roles** in nutrition services

Goals of WIC POPS Staffing Policy Analysis

- Use State agency staffing policies and manuals to identify how WIC State agencies are interpreting and implementing paraprofessional roles
- The findings will inform **development of paraprofessional staffing models and training in WIC**

Document Analysis



Questions that Guided Analysis

1. How do WIC agencies define paraprofessionals?
2. How many agencies have nutrition paraprofessional positions?
3. What are the paraprofessional positions in WIC?
 - Experience, qualifications, and functions?
3. What do paraprofessional staffing models look like?
 - Do paraprofessionals have opportunities for advancement?

Document Analysis Process

- R** Ready the materials
- E** Extract data
- A** Analyze data
- D** Distill findings

R Ready The Materials



Gathering Materials

Names of documents varied

- Policy and procedure manuals
- Program or policy manuals
- Local agency staffing requirements
- Individual job descriptions
- Organizational charts

Rate of Participation

60% of State agencies participated (53 out of 88)

- 71% of geographic states
- 60% of territories
- 13% of Indian Tribal Organizations

Extract Data



Extracting Data

Used Excel to extract information about positions from policy

- Position type
- Title
- Required qualifications
- Recommended qualifications
- Position responsibilities
- Paraprofessional definitions

Verifying and Correcting Extracted Data

Sent the information extracted from websites (n=27) back to each state agency to offer them an opportunity to provide corrections or updated information

19 (70%) verified info or provided corrections

8 (30%) did not respond

A Analyze Data



Answering Our First Question

How do WIC State agencies define paraprofessionals?

WIC Agency Definitions

Defining “Paraprofessional”

- 30% of agencies defined “paraprofessional”

Of those with a definition:

- 85% included that paraprofessionals **did not have prior training or credentialing**
- 77% included that paraprofessionals **assisted or worked under a licensed professional**
- 46% included that paraprofessionals were **from the community** served by the agency

Most Common Paraprofessional Definition

Language from USDA WIC Breastfeeding Model Components for Peer Counseling:

“Those without extended professional training in health, nutrition or the clinical management of breastfeeding who are selected from the group to be served and are trained and given ongoing supervision to provide a basic service or function. Paraprofessionals provide specific tasks within a defined scope of practice. They assist professionals, but are not licensed or credentialed as healthcare, nutrition, or lactation consultant professionals.”

- Used by 38% of State agencies



WIC POPS Paraprofessional Position Definition

Responsibilities:

Provides a non-breastfeeding nutrition service (e.g., nutrition education (group or individual), counseling, certification, measure anthropometrics or iron status)

Qualifications:

Does not require a license or health credential

- i.e., RDN, Registered Nurse, Physician Assistant, or Physician

Does not require a bachelor's or master's degree

- i.e., cannot be considered a qualified nutritionist per the NSS

Exception: NDTRs are included despite having a credential because

- NDTRs must work under an RDN
- NDTR credential is not specified in NSS



Answering Our Second Question

How many State agencies have nutrition paraprofessional positions?

96% of State agencies had at least one paraprofessional position

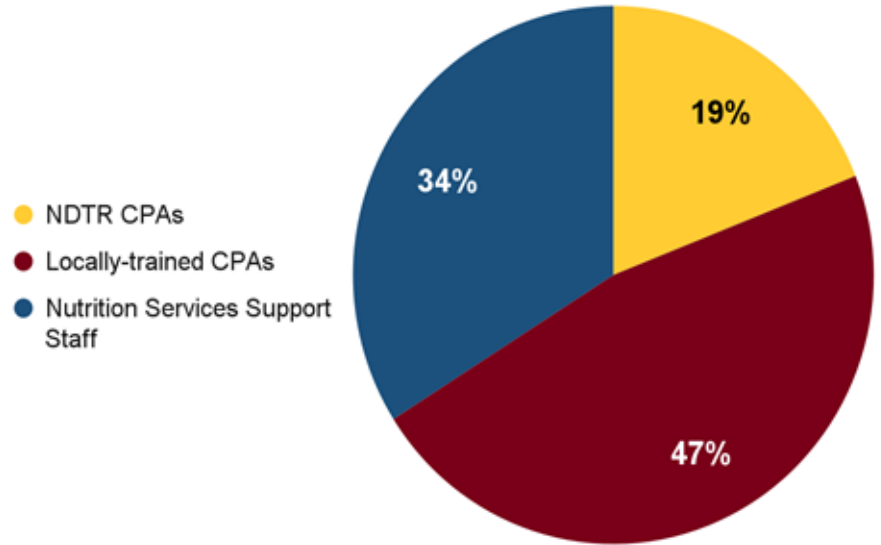
Answering Our Third Question

What are the paraprofessional positions in WIC?

- Experience/qualifications and functions?

Grouping Paraprofessional Positions

We identified **3 groups** of paraprofessional positions based on similar qualifications and responsibilities



Paraprofessional Position Groups

NDTR CPAs

CPA responsibilities*
for low-risk
participants

NDTR credential

17 positions
16 agencies
11 different titles

Locally-trained CPAs

CPA responsibilities*
for low- or medium-
risk participants

High school and/or
experience (*or NDTR*)
+ job training

42 positions
35 agencies
32 different titles

Nutrition Services Support Staff

Anthropometrics or
iron and/or general,
low-risk nutrition
education

High school and/or
experience

31 Positions
26 agencies
27 different titles

* Determine
nutritional risk
and prescribe
supplemental
foods

NDTR CPAs

CPA responsibilities
for low- or medium-
risk participants

Determine nutrition risk, provide nutrition education,
prescribe food package

Some State agencies allow them to work with high-risk
participants when a qualified nutritionist is not available

NDTR credential

NDTR credential is a qualifying option for CPA role (often
alongside other credentials like RDN, RN, PA, etc).

Sometimes it was the only qualifying option (position was
specific to a NDTR)

17 positions
16 agencies
11 different titles

- *CPA (most common)*
- *Dietetic Technician*
- *Certifying Authority*
- *Nutritionist I*
- *Nutrition Counselor II*
- *Certifying Health Professional*

Examples: How NDTR Qualifications Were Addressed

NDTR CPA: Alongside other credentials

WIC Nutritionist Qualifications:

- Masters or bachelors nutrition/health-related degree;
- OR Completed DPD or CP dietetics program;
- OR Holds the NDTR credential

NDTR CPA: Specific position for NDTRs

Diet Technician Qualifications:

- Completion of an approved dietetic technician program

Locally trained CPA: NDTR or through experience

CPA Qualifications:

- Credential (i.e. DTR, RN, LPN, IBCLC) or nutrition/health-related degree;
- OR 4 yrs experience as an Health Professional Assistant or Breastfeeding Peer Counselor and paraprofessional recommendation/ SA approval

Locally-trained CPAs

CPA responsibilities
for low- or medium-
risk participants

High school and/or
experience (*or NDTR*)
+ job training

42 positions
35 agencies
32 different titles

Determine nutrition risk, provide nutrition education/counseling, prescribe food package

Some State agencies allow them to work with high-risk participants when a qualified nutritionist is not available

High school education and/or varying levels of experience and complete on-the-job training to perform CPA functions

Some agencies include NDTR credential as alternative qualifying option

- *CPA (most common)*
- *Paraprofessional CPA*
- *Nutrition Associate*
- *Nutrition Educator*
- *Nutrition Assistant*
- *WIC Educator*

Nutrition Services Support Staff

Anthropometrics or iron and/or general, low-risk nutrition education

High school and/or experience

31 Positions
26 agencies
27 different titles

Take anthropometric or hemoglobin measures AND/OR provide general, low-risk nutrition education

Cannot determine nutritional risk or prescribe food package

Often have clerical duties

High school education and/or experienced-based qualification

Amount of experience required varies

- *Nutrition Assistant (most common)*
- *Nutrition Aide*
- *Nutrition Educator*
- *Public Assistance Representative*
- *WIC Paraprofessional*
- *Nutrition Education Technician/Administrative Clerk*

“In a Pinch” Positions

4 positions enabled flexibilities if required staff were unavailable

Local agencies may hire WIC Nutrition Assistant(s) with approval from the State WIC Office. ...Must provide a written request to the State Office...that provides the following information: Need, ... training, and supervision plans...

Applicants will be reviewed to ensure minimum competencies of the WIC Nutritionist/Nutritionist and NDTR are met to temporarily fulfill the duties that an RD/RDN would perform. This request shall be submitted and reviewed annually.

May perform job duties of a Community Program Aide II if needed

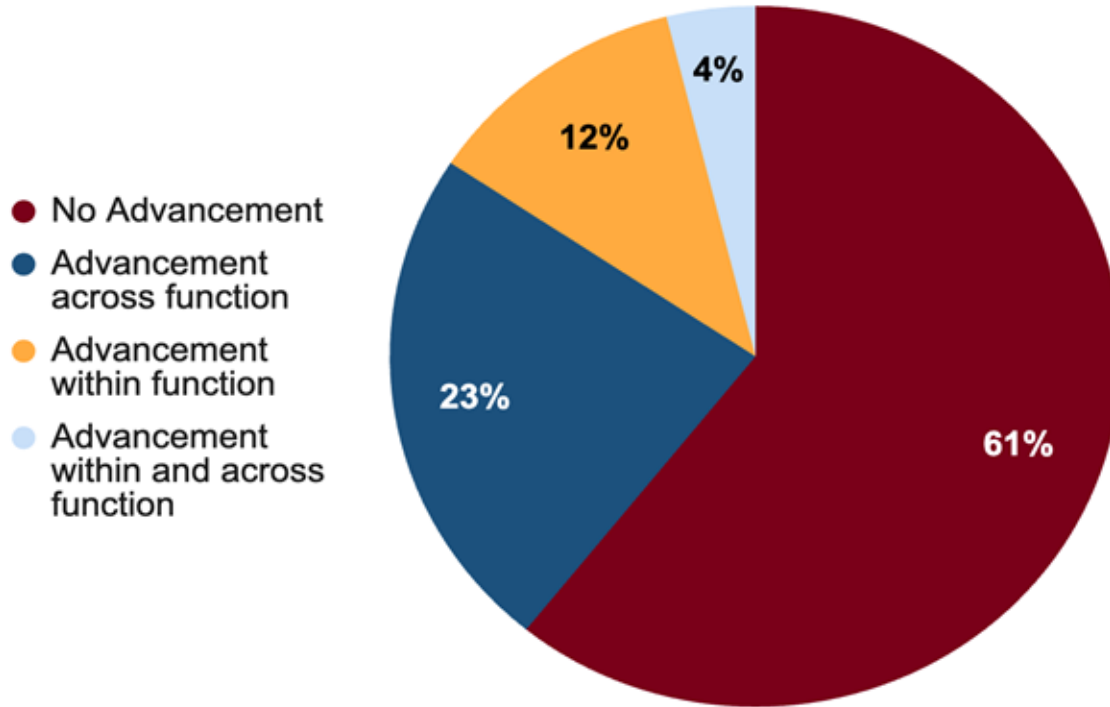


Answering Our Fourth Question

What do paraprofessional staffing models look like?

- Do paraprofessionals have opportunities for advancement?

Paraprofessional Staffing Models



Positions with No Advancement

Model Description

- Single paraprofessional position, or
- Two positions, one of which was a NDTR CPA, so no advancement without additional formal education

31 State agencies

- Single paraprofessional position: NDTR CPA (n=5)
- Single paraprofessional position: Locally-trained CPA (n=13)
- Single paraprofessional position: Nutrition Support Staff (n=6)
- Two positions, but one is a NDTR CPA (n=7)

Positions with Advancement Across Function

Model Description

- Have both nutrition support and locally-trained CPA positions

12 State agencies

- 2 positions: 1 nutrition support and 1 locally-trained CPA
(n=9)
- 3 positions: 1 nutrition support, 1 locally-trained CPA, 1 NDTR
CPA (n=3)



Nutrition Services Support Staff

Health Professional Assistant (HPA)

Qualifications:

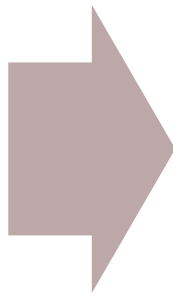
High school degree or GED

Responsibilities:

Anthropometric measures

Hemoglobin testing

Clerical duties



Locally-trained CPA Position

Competent Professional Authority (CPA)

Qualifications:

Credential (i.e. DTR, RN, LPN, IBCLC) or nutrition/health-related degree;

OR 4 yrs experience as an HPA or BFPC and paraprofessional recommendation/ SA approval

Responsibilities:

Nutrition assessment (including anthropometrics, hemoglobin)

Assign nutrition risk

Breastfeeding assessment

Non-high risk nutrition education and counseling

Prescribes food packages

Positions with Advancement Within Function

Model Description

- Have multiple paraprofessional positions within the same position group

6 State agencies:

- 2 distinct locally-trained CPA positions (n=2)
- 3 distinct locally-trained CPA positions (n=1)
- 3 distinct positions: 2 locally-trained CPA positions and 1 NDTR CPA (n=1)
- 2 distinct nutrition support staff positions (n=1)
- 3 distinct nutrition support staff positions (n=1)



Nutrition Assistant – CPA I (locally trained CPA)

Qualifications:

High school degree or GED
1 yr experience in a health care field

Completion of training program to obtain CPA I status

Responsibilities:

Nutrition care for **low-risk children**

Nutrition assessment

Assigns nutrition risk

Nutrition and breastfeeding counseling and education

Prescribes food packages



Nutrition Assistant – CPA II (locally trained CPA)

Qualifications:

High school degree or GED
1 yr experience in a health care field

Completion of training program to obtain CPA II status

Responsibilities:

Nutrition care for **all low-risk participants**

Nutrition assessment

Assigns nutrition risk

Nutrition and breastfeeding counseling and education

Prescribes food packages

Assists in planning and developing nutrition education materials and activities



Dietetic Technician– CPA III (NDTR CPA)

Qualifications: Associate's degree in dietetic technology and DTR registration

Responsibilities:

Nutrition care for low and **selected higher risk participants**

Nutrition assessment

Assigns nutrition risk

Nutrition and breastfeeding counseling and education

Prescribes food packages

Helps train CPA I and II

Participates in planning, development, and evaluation of nutrition education materials and activities AND outreach, training, and policy activities

Positions with Advancement Within and Across Function

Model Description

- Have paraprofessional positions as nutrition support staff and locally trained CPAs and have multiple positions within at least one of the position groups

2 State agencies

- 5 positions: 2 nutrition support, 3 locally-trained CPA (n=1)
- 3 positions: 2 nutrition support, 1 locally-trained CPA (n=1)



Nutrition Educator 1

(nutrition support)

Qualifications:

No specialized training or experience required

Responsibilities:

Provides nutrition education

Assists in outreach and recruitment activities

Clerical duties

Within
function

Nutrition Educator 2

(nutrition support)

Qualifications:

1 yr experience in nutritional education or counseling, food service, or clerical work;

OR 6 semester hours in food and/or nutrition services;

OR 1 year of vocational or technical school training in a dietetic assistant curriculum.

* Every 30 semester hours from a university will be credited as 1 year of experience.*

Responsibilities:

Plans and prepares nutrition education lessons and recipe demonstrations

Provides nutrition education

Organizes and conducts outreach

Clerical duties

Across
function

Health Educator

(locally trained CPA)

Qualifications:

4 yrs experience as a Nutrition Educator or in patient care;

OR 12 semester hours in food and nutrition or dietetics PLUS 3 yrs as a Nutrition Educator or in patient care;

OR bachelor's degree in nutrition/health-related field

Responsibilities:

Serves as a CPA

Determines WIC eligibility

Nutrition assessment

Prescribes food packages

Conducts community outreach and vendor monitoring

Participates in program planning and development



Distill Findings



Variation in Paraprofessional Positions

- While most State agencies have a paraprofessional position, there is much variation!
- There are 3 clear groups:
 - NDTRs
 - Locally-trained CPAs
 - Nutrition support staff
- “In a pinch” position category addresses need for flexibility

These findings were contextualized through discussions with the advisory board.



Comparison to Previously Published Data

- **No uniform definition for paraprofessionals**
 - Aligns with 2006 WIC staffing data collection project
- WIC POPS takes it further by identifying and describing variability of specific position categories
 - Example: titles of Nutrition Assistant, WIC Educator, and WIC Certifier appeared in multiple categories but had different levels of responsibilities and/or required training

Variability in NDTR Credential

- Multiple ways NDTRs showed up in WIC staffing policies
 - Distinct NDTR credential position
 - NDTR alongside credentials listed in NSS as qualifications for CPAs
 - NDTR credential considered to be same as paraprofessional staff
- Different pathways to obtain the NDTR credential is likely contributor to discrepancies

A Lack of Opportunities for Advancement

- No advancement staffing model was the most common model in analysis
- Lack of opportunities to advance may lead to poor staff retention and an inability to offer competitive pay
 - Reasons paraprofessionals report leaving workforce
- Advancement may be challenging since pathway involves obtaining more education or credentials

Using Community Health Workers as a Model?

- Community health worker (CHW) model used in other areas of healthcare that can be used to envision standardized paraprofessional role
 - CHWs have been shown to positively impact maternal and child health outcomes
- Include standardized competencies similar as ones that exist for CHWs with ability for flexibility to allow for customization

Next Steps



Next Steps

- Presentation on the findings of the focus group phase of the project (step 2 of formative assessment)
 - Results will be shared at the **2026 National Maternal Nutrition Intensive Course**
- Findings from both the policy analysis and the focus groups will be used to **develop guidance and resources to support paraprofessionals in WIC**
- If you are part of a WIC agency, reach out to get involved!



Questions?

wicpops@umn.edu

Learn more at
<https://wicpops.umn.edu/>



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Thank You!

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