

Touching Hearts and Minds (THM)

Location: Massachusetts
 Date Submitted: 6/2009
 Category: **Emerging Practice**

BACKGROUND

The WIC program has been providing nutrition education and counseling to its participants since the program's inception. However, the incidence of overweight/obesity continue to rise and the improvement in positive health behaviors such as fruit and vegetable consumption and breastfeeding is not as great as we would expect. WIC mothers reported in focus groups, prior to the initiation of this project, that WIC nutrition messages did not seem relevant to them and that they were more likely to act on the advice of a family member or physician than a WIC nutritionist. This information suggests that the nutrition education and counseling delivery methods may be need modification.

Advertising and marketing research indicates that behavior change decisions are often based on emotion rather than logic or fact. Although logic and fact is less persuasive in changing behaviors, it is the most common approach used in traditional WIC nutrition education. Touching Hearts and Minds (THM) has developed messages and educational materials that combine relevant, emotional 'pulse points' with current nutrition science to better connect with WIC families and more effectively promote the adoption of healthy behaviors.

Touching Hearts and Minds principles can be applied throughout the field of health education to design and deliver messages that more effectively promote behavior change.

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The first goal of the project was to identify the emotional 'pulse points' (fundamental emotional impulses) of WIC parents related to eating, parenting and physical activity to develop WIC nutrition education messages that better connect with our families.

The second goal of THM was to develop messages and materials that combine the emotional 'pulse points' with current factual nutrition

TITLE V/MCH BLOCK GRANT MEASURES ADDRESSED
<p>#4: A) Percent of infants who are ever breastfed and B) Percent of infants breastfed exclusively through 6 months.</p> <p>#14: A) Percent of women who smoke during pregnancy and B) Percent of children who live in households where someone smokes.</p>

The third goal was to improve WIC nutrition staff's understanding of the importance and value of emotional messages and to develop skills in incorporating these messages and the newly created materials in nutrition counseling and education.

The final goal of the THM project was to offer the emotion-based messages, materials and training to nutrition educators nationwide. To accomplish this goal, a website was created to easily and inexpensively disseminate participant nutrition education material, staff training tools, implementation techniques and valuable supportive information from this innovative project.

TARGET POPULATION SERVED

Touching Hearts and Minds, originally a pilot project targeting approximately 25,000 WIC participants in Massachusetts, has been rolled out statewide and now targets almost 140,000 women, infants and children participating in Massachusetts WIC.

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Focus groups conducted with WIC mothers determined mothers' key emotional pulse points (security, pride, happiness, and the desire to be a good mother) that were then incorporated into the new messages and materials. This process also involved nutrition staff at six agencies throughout Massachusetts to offer ongoing feedback of project implementation for more than a year during the pilot phase.

The Touching Hearts and Minds project also works with WIC staff to learn how to competently and comfortably engage participants by connecting with them on an emotional level when providing nutrition services. A key Touching Hearts and Minds counseling strategy utilizes facilitated group discussion in place of traditional nutrition classes, knowing that mothers learn more from other mothers than from professionals whose perspectives are not viewed as similar enough to their own.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES/EVALUATION DATA

Focus groups and interviews evaluating Touching Hearts and Minds confirmed that mothers are more responsive to messages provided in the new emotional format and that participant-focused counseling strategies, like facilitated group discussion, are highly valued by WIC participants.

Overall, participants liked the new nutrition messages much better than traditional messages. They appreciated that the pieces looked like something they would see in a magazine rather than something developed for a government program. They felt that the personal testimony of other mothers spoke to them and encouraged attempts at new health behaviors. The most positively perceived component of the program was the facilitated group education. Mothers really loved having other mothers to talk with and to gain insight from.

PROGRAM COST

The cost per client for this program is \$2.91 and included all of the costs related to material development, design and evaluation. The sustainability of the project is much more cost effective, costing approximately 8 cents per nutrition education piece.

ASSETS & CHALLENGES

Assets

- Data from a previous program targeting obesity among Hispanics demonstrated a disconnect between WIC nutritional information and the behavior of WIC clients, which led to this project.

Challenges

- The counseling strategies utilized by this project are not the same as those taught in universities where our nutrition staff is trained, therefore the pilot phase took longer than anticipated.

Overcoming Challenges

- Numerous trainings and follow-up technical assistance was offered to staff who struggled with the practice.
- On-site guidance and training on these new concepts have been incorporated into the new staff training for all incoming WIC staff.

LESSONS LEARNED

While WIC staff did have a favorable reaction to the new practice, the results from their surveys were mixed and indicated that there is a need to provide more training and offer a slower implementation process upon rollout to allow for change to occur.

FUTURE STEPS

The pilot phase of the project lasted approximately three years and the practice is ongoing. THM continues to develop new nutrition education materials and counseling strategies using this model.

COLLABORATIONS

Throughout the rollout phase of this project, THM has collaborated with Head Start, Early Intervention, MCH Nutrition Programs and other key players in the public health community working with similar populations.

PEER REVIEW & REPLICATION

The Touching Hearts and Minds Program staff has been asked to share their nutrition education materials with WIC programs in more than 30 states nationwide. Other nutrition related programs have adapted some of the messages created by THM for their use. The SNAP Program (formerly Food Stamps) embraced this methodology and used a similar strategy to develop their new nutrition education campaign.

RESOURCES PROVIDED

To learn more about this program and for tips about implementation, please visit:

http://touchingheartstouchingminds.com/tools_guidelines.php

Key words: Nutrition & Physical Activity, WIC, Health Promotion, Health Messaging, Infant Health, Consumer Involvement

****For more information about programs included in AMCHP's Innovation Station database, contact bp@amchp.org. Please be sure to include the title of the program in the subject heading of your email****

