

## POLICY CHANGES RAISE BREASTFEEDING RATES



**R**ecent significant WIC policy changes to the WIC food package, along with targeted education and support, are positively influencing exclusive breastfeeding. At the country's largest local WIC agency, located in Southern California, exclusive breastfeeding has increased significantly. Staff training and participant education alone resulted in a significant increase in mothers initiating and continuing exclusive breastfeeding, and those rates rose again after the new WIC food packages were implemented.

### The Importance of Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding has long been proven to protect mothers and infants from chronic health problems such as infections, diabetes, and cancer.<sup>1</sup> This protection is strongest when breastfeeding is exclusive—babies receive no foods or fluids other than breast milk—and when it continues at least for the first six months of life. Recent calls to support breastfeeding from the Surgeon General,<sup>2</sup> the Institute of Medicine (IOM),<sup>3</sup> and the National Prevention Council<sup>4</sup> highlight breastfeeding as a key strategy for stemming the epidemic of childhood obesity, starting at birth.

Despite years of promotion and education, relatively few infants in California are breastfed exclusively, even for a few weeks. In 2009, 90 percent of women in California started breastfeeding in the hospital, but only about half left the hospital exclusively breastfeeding.<sup>5</sup>

Low-income children on the WIC program, who are most vulnerable to chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes,<sup>6</sup> have historically been the least likely to be breastfed exclusively.<sup>7,8</sup> Fewer than 20 percent of California WIC participants in 2010 were breastfeeding exclusively at three months after birth, and that percentage dropped to fewer than 16 percent at six months.<sup>9</sup> Now, however, thanks to sweeping California WIC policy changes implemented in the past two years, there has been a remarkable improvement in these trends.<sup>10</sup>

### New WIC Policies: Enhanced Foods and Support for Breastfeeding Mothers

Based on Institute of Medicine recommendations, in 2009 USDA implemented new rules to support exclusive breastfeeding. These rules increased the value of the WIC food package for mothers who fully breastfeed (and who receive no WIC checks for formula), reduced the amount of formula available for mothers who partially breastfeed, calibrated formula amounts for infants by age, and postponed the addition of complementary foods for infants. California WIC began implementing these new policies in late 2009 and included an important additional policy that other states could choose to implement as well: in order to firmly establish exclusive breastfeeding, breastfeeding mothers are not routinely given infant formula in the first month postpartum (see box).

### Multiple WIC Policies in California Encourage Exclusive Breastfeeding

- *No routine issuance of formula in the first 30 days for breastfeeding infants*
- *Individual assessment of mother and baby for breastfeeding concerns and problems immediately postpartum and at the first postpartum visit*
- *More carefully calculated quantities of supplemental formula*
- *Greatly enhanced food package for breastfeeding mothers*