Breastfeeding moms find support at Community Gatherings: Exploring new strategies

**Description:** The Milwaukee County Breastfeeding Coalition (MCBC), in partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee College of Nursing and the African American Breastfeeding Network (AABN), implemented activities to improve the health and nutrition of infants by increasing breastfeeding initiation and duration. The project focused on the north side of Milwaukee and the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) clinics that had the lowest breastfeeding rates.

**Relevance:** Breast milk is widely acknowledged to be the most complete form of nutrition for infants. If a mother breastfeeds, sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is decreased by 50 percent, independent of sleep position.

Milwaukee County has significantly lower breastfeeding rates than Wisconsin as a whole. Breastfeeding rates differ substantially by race and socioeconomic level. Nationally, African American mothers are 2½ times less likely to breastfeed than Caucasian mothers. According to Milwaukee County's WIC program, 51.7 percent of African American mothers initiate breastfeeding in the hospital, but by 3 months, only 9.3 percent breastfeed exclusively.

**Results:** Project organizers developed, implemented and evaluated strategies to support more than 750 African American mothers in Milwaukee County. These strategies included the highly successful Breastfeeding Community Gatherings created by the AABN. Participants in this community support program received dinner, childcare and information about breastfeeding.

The majority of participants during the grant period were pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers, with a significant increase in participation after fathers began attending. Participation grew from 77 during in 2011 to 288 in 2012, when 69 percent of attendees rated the gathering as excellent and 60 percent of pregnant participants reported that they were more likely to breastfeed when their baby was born.

In 2013, the AABN received an additional grant through the Wisconsin Partnership Program’s Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families (LIHF) to expand this programming. Another pilot demonstration within this project was the Mama Milk Project, which supported 10 women who participated in the Breastfeeding Community Gatherings. The women received home visits shortly after giving birth and three follow-up visits until their baby was 6 months old or weaned.

The Milwaukee County Breastfeeding Coalition also worked with WIC clinic staff and hospital lactation support staff to develop open communication between health care providers and the community. In addition, the coalition collaborated with the Milwaukee Public Schools to update information about breast health and breastfeeding in the human growth and development curriculum. The goal is to continue to integrate successful project elements into ongoing practices of project partners in the Milwaukee area.
