

Tailoring Nutrition Services:

Development of a Cultural Toolkit for Iowa WIC Staff

Submitted by Nikki Davenport, RDN, LD, Iowa WIC Nutrition Services Coordinator



The Iowa Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serves thousands of participants from all races, ethnicities, and backgrounds and employs over two hundred local agency staff. In collaboration with a committee of local agencies, the Iowa WIC Program developed a cultural toolkit for local agency staff to better meet the needs of the most prevalent cultural groups in the state. The toolkit includes resources and information that staff can use to increase their understanding of the cultures served and provide tailored nutrition services for all participants.

Background

Culture influences attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values about good health, including decisions about what to eat, when to eat, how foods are prepared, and the timing and frequency of meals. Different cultures have different communication styles and different meanings for certain behaviors and gestures. Understanding culture is a crucial element to help meet people where they are and to tailor nutrition messages appropriately.

The Iowa WIC Program developed the toolkit through a collaboration of state and local agencies to increase WIC staff knowledge of the cultural traditions of WIC clientele. The toolkit includes information to help WIC counselors recognize the food-related practices and beliefs of different cultures. It also provides suggestions for adapting counseling methods based on traditional communication styles and interpersonal behaviors, such as body language, vocal volume, distance, and touch.

According to Merriam-Webster,¹

culture is the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time.

1 "culture." 2019. In *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved December 18, 2019, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>



Process and Description

To ensure consistency in the format and types of information provided, the Iowa WIC state agency developed a standardized template (Figure 1), which included the following:

- primary language;
- country of origin, including details on the historical and current geo-political status;
- traditions, customs, and taboos;
- holidays and celebrations;
- health disparities;
- traditional foods and food patterns; and
- considerations for working with clients.

The state agency assigned each of their 20 local agencies a cultural group. The Local Agency Coordinators then assigned interested staff to complete the template.

The final toolkit, containing the 21 completed “Culture and Foods” templates and all cited references, is housed on Iowa’s WIC web portal. All local agency WIC staff have been encouraged to review the entire toolkit first and to refer back to specific cultural groups, as relevant, ahead of counseling sessions.

The toolkit has also been shared with the Iowa Bureaus of Maternal Child Health and Oral Health to use with their local agencies.

TABLE 1: THE 21 MOST PREVALENT CULTURES IN IOWA

African American	Burmese
Chinese	Congolese
el Salvadoran	Ethiopian
Guatemalan	Indian (Asian)
Japanese	Kirundi
Laos	Mexican
Micronesian	Orthodox Jew
Pacific Islander	Somali
South Korean	Sudanese
Swahili	Ukranian
Vietnamese	

“We learned a lot about [Swahili] culture and feel we are better able to connect with and serve our Swahili families.”

Lexie Stoneking, RD, LD, CLS
Broadlawns WIC Program
Des Moines, Iowa



Lessons Learned

Developing a standardized template was crucial for obtaining the most relevant information across cultures and minimizing staff burden. However, adding a space to share stories from the community on the template would have helped to provide cultural context. Iowa is hoping to create a place on their portal for stories in the near future.

Ideas for Use

The toolkit is a resource to support increased knowledge and skill in the [Communication & Cultural Sensitivity](#) public health nutrition category of practice. As public health professionals, you can reach out to community partners to gather interest and support in creating your own toolkit, adapted to the various cultures served in your own state or community. You may even find ways to improve upon the toolkit. For example, developing very short trainings or video vignettes to accompany the written materials could increase their use. While the toolkit is meant to support the tailoring of nutrition services, it may be helpful to use in conjunction with additional resources, such as those at the [National Center for Cultural Competence](#).

Member Biography

Nikki Davenport, RDN, LD, is the Nutrition Services Coordinator for the State of Iowa WIC Program at the Iowa Department of Public Health. Prior to joining the State WIC staff in 2012, Nikki worked at a local WIC agency in Des Moines for eight years and was previously an in-store dietitian. She enjoys spending time with family and friends, shopping, and cooking. Most of her time is spent watching her three kids participate in the sports they love, which include go-kart racing, dance, soccer, archery and baseball.

Contact Information

Contact the Iowa WIC Program at wic@idph.iowa.gov for a copy of the complete toolkit.

Contact the Association of State Public Health Nutritionists at ASPHN@ASPHN.org for questions about this Success Story.

Figure 1: Toolkit Template Pages 1 and 2



1/2019

[Group Name] Culture & Foods

Country of Origin:
Primary Language(s):
Percent of Iowa's Population:

Background

[Summarize your research on the history of their country as well as its current state.]

[Insert a map showing where in the world the country is located and if possible, a map showing the regions/states within the country itself.]

[Insert a picture or pictures of traditional clothes/dress or traditional foods and be sure to include a caption describing what is pictured. If needed this space can also be used to cover another topic area not already identified but that would provide value to staff.]

Education and Literacy

[Summarize the education and literacy level this population typically has. Are they educated in their home country and to what extent? Will it vary by gender? Do they tend to seek additional education when they get here?]

Traditions, Customs, & Taboos

[Summarize your research.]

Holidays & Celebrations

[Summarize your research.]

[Group Name] Culture & Foods

Health Disparities

[Summarize your research. Does this population have a higher burden of illness, injury, disability or mortality than another? Is there a difference in how, why or the type of medical care they are likely to seek?]

Traditional Foods & Meal Patterns

[Summarize your research and include how WIC foods can be used to accommodate the traditional diet and/or serve as a proxy for a common food]

Considerations for WIC

[Summarize your research to describe how WIC staff can use this information to increase cultural awareness and sensitivity, and how they can apply this information in their daily interviews. Include items such as:

- Counseling methods based on communication styles and interpersonal behaviors (body language, vocal volume, distance, touch, etc.).
- Customizing food packages based on cultural food preferences.
- Customizing behavioral interventions to include cultural traditions, activities, friend's/family members, social situations and lifestyle behaviors.
- Making referrals to other services based on needs and comfort level of individual participants.
- How to encourage and empower these specific WIC participants to overcome challenges or barriers (breastfeeding, social/family support, cooking, shopping, wellness, physical activity, etc.).

What's the Iowa Connection?

[Summarize why this population typically migrates to the state of Iowa, where/what type of jobs do they tend to hold when they get here and list the agencies in Iowa that can work with or provide resources to this immigrant population.]

[Insert a picture or pictures of traditional food or meals and be sure to include a caption describing what is pictured. If needed this space can also be used to cover another topic area not already identified but that would provide value to staff.]

How are we Living?

[Summarize who is typically living in the home? What do they use to cook? What are their traditional cooking/food preparation methods? Where and how do they eat their meals? How do they get around? where this population typically lives throughout the state of Iowa.]



WIC client at the West Central Community Action WIC Clinic in Harlan, Iowa.



Micronesian family served by the North Iowa Community Action Organization Family Health Center WIC Program.