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Alaska WIC and Pacify Health Partner to Expand Access to Breastfeeding Support Services

The six-year partnership will provide 24/7 virtual lactation support to approximately 3,000 WIC participants annually, addressing critical healthcare access gaps across Alaska's vast rural communities

JUNEAU, Alaska – The Alaska Department of Health's WIC program has partnered with Pacify Health to launch a comprehensive virtual lactation support service, providing 24/7 access to International Board-Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLCs) for WIC participants across the state. This partnership addresses Alaska's severe shortage of lactation professionals while supporting families in the nation's most geographically challenging state.

Alaska WIC serves approximately 14,000 Alaskans monthly, with an average of 3,216 pregnant and postpartum women currently enrolled. Through the Pacify platform, Alaska WIC participants will receive unlimited access to a nationwide network of IBCLCs through video consultations, phone calls, and texting through one streamlined mobile application. Research demonstrates that this type of professional lactation support significantly increases breastfeeding initiation and duration rates, improving health outcomes for both mothers and infants.

"We are especially excited to begin offering this virtual lactation service during National Breastfeeding Month and right after Indigenous Milk Medicine Week," said Amber Christis, WIC Breastfeeding Coordinator at the Alaska Department of Health.

Addressing Critical Healthcare Gaps

Alaskans spread across our vast state live in a unique environment for maternal and infant healthcare. Most of Alaska currently has far below the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation of 8.6 IBCLCs per 1,000 births. While all WIC staff are trained to support and help with breastfeeding, more clinical lactation help is needed in some areas.

"Rural Alaskan families face extraordinary challenges," explained Helena Jacobs from the Alaska Native Birthworkers Community. "Pregnant people from rural villages travel to regional hubs usually around 36 weeks for delivery. Some of these women are covering distances equivalent to traveling from Seattle to Tijuana, Mexico, and then they return home postpartum, sometimes alone, on multiple connecting flights with newborns."

Historical trauma from colonization compounds these challenges. For nearly 100 years, Alaska Native spiritual practices were illegal, and young people were removed from their homes for boarding schools, disrupting intergenerational knowledge transfer about traditional birthing and breastfeeding practices.

Proven Results and Cultural Sensitivity

Through partnerships with other public health agencies, Pacify has demonstrated the ability to improve breastfeeding rates by up to 24%. A study conducted by the RAND Corporation found that "Pacify has demonstrated that virtual lactation services improve breastfeeding rates and patient experience, particularly among women in rural areas where critical gaps often exist," according to Jennifer Sargent, CEO of Pacify. This research recently received additional funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). "Improved breast-feeding rates have tangible outcomes. In our own studies we've seen a 21% reduction in infant ER visits. Meaning that we're not only helping new parents and infants, we're reducing unnecessary burdens on clinicians and reducing health costs for the state."

The service is specifically designed to address Alaska's cultural diversity, with providers trained to understand the significance of clients' locations and historical impacts on healthcare access. Pacify's network of more than 100 IBCLCs offers care in both English and Spanish, with translation services available for other languages through the app. For more information, visit <https://www.pacify.com>.

Supporting State Health Priorities

The partnership aligns with Governor Dunleavy's Healthy Families initiative, particularly the Healthy Beginnings pillar focused on maternal and child health. It also supports Administrative Order No. 331's Alaska Food Security and Independence Task Force goals, as breastfeeding can protect families from food insecurity and reduce dependence on external food supplies.

Alaska data shows strong breastfeeding initiation rates (92% compared to the national rate of 84%) with rates declining after three months:

- Exclusive breastfeeding through 3 months: 60%
- Any breastfeeding at 6 months: 73%
- Exclusive breastfeeding through 6 months: 42%
- Any breastfeeding at 12 months: 50%

The top two reasons Alaskan mothers stop breastfeeding are "not producing enough milk" (56%) and "baby had difficulty latching or nursing" (35%)—both issues that professional lactation support directly addresses (2023 PRAMS survey data)

Access and Enrollment

All Alaskan WIC participants are eligible for this service. Participants who would like to enroll in Pacify's virtual infant feeding support platform can contact their local WIC clinic or call that state WIC office at (907) 465-3100, option 2. Once enrolled in Pacify, the service provides unlimited consultations with no appointments required, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Most calls are answered in under 5 minutes, providing on-demand access to lactation consultants whenever families need support.