

SHELTERS ARE HOMES TO BREASTFEEDING MOMS AND BABIES

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It's Time to Write Policies Supporting Mom and Baby Wherever They Live!

Creating supportive environments for women in shelters provides an opportunity to improve breastfeeding rates among this high-risk population.

Your Role: Be an innovative leader!

We need policy, systems, and environmental changes to support breastfeeding in shelters serving pregnant and postpartum women.

Why supporting breastfeeding in shelters is important

Family and maternity shelters house infants and children, a high-risk population that benefits from breastfeeding.² Risk factors associated with low prevalence of breastfeeding are concentrated in populations that may experience homelessness secondary to abuse, poverty, and trauma.¹

WHO and AAP agree on the health benefits of breastfeeding for mothers and babies.



Best nutrition for the new baby: Breastfeeding provides the perfect mix of nutrients.³



Reduces mom's risk of various diseases such as ovarian cancer, breast cancer and diabetes.⁴



Helps with the brain development of the baby.³



Reduces the risk for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.⁴

Breastfeeding Impacts Society

There are benefits to breastfeeding that are felt outside the family unit. These benefits touch the environment and our



Breastfeeding is environmentally friendly and does not create pollution or waste products.



Parents will use less sick days to care for sick children at home.



Breastfeeding reduces the cost of healthcare premiums because babies are healthier.



Mom in shelters told “to cover up”

A mother in Hawaii living in a homeless shelter with her young infant made the decision to nurse her baby. While she was breastfeeding, staff at the shelter told her she needed to “cover up” or leave the shelter. This mother stated that the private locations at the shelter to breastfeed did not provide a supportive or comfortable environment for her to feed her child. As a result, staff at the shelter were trained on the support breastfeeding mothers need and the rights they are entitled to.⁴ The Institute for Health in Hawaii stated

“This is an opportunity for us to learn more and to really share with the community that we are about being proactive and about being helpful to our community as well.”⁵

This mother was able to have her story heard which led to positive changes, but how do we establish and maintain shelter policies where breastfeeding is the norm nationwide?

Breastfeeding guidance for mothers living in emergency situations

Breastfeeding guidance during emergency situations is available for both mothers and professionals, including policy briefs, **checklists**, and other resources.¹ This guidance assists mothers living through crisis situations related to disasters; however, it does not easily translate to mothers and babies living in transitional housing.

But what about mothers and infants living in emergency or transitional housing?

There is very little research or best practices available on this high-risk population.

Call to Action

More research on mothers’ feeding choices in shelters is needed. Further discovery of the impact of breastfeeding friendly supportive policies, modelling, and peer support throughout the breastfeeding experience for mothers living in shelter are a few examples of policy, systems, and environmental changes that could improve breastfeeding rates of mothers living in shelter.⁶





How we can support mothers in shelters now

Women living in shelters need support from professionals, family and peers to make the choice to breastfeed.⁶ In addition, shelters should develop and institute policies that support mothers and their feeding choices.

Recommendations for how family members and peers can support breastfeeding mothers living in shelter include:

- Establish a safe environment with protection from harassment for all mothers and caregivers with infants and children.
- Identify mothers who breastfeed when they arrive at the shelter and provide them with education, assurance, and support to sustain and increase their milk supply.
- Strongly encourage, educate, and support any woman who gives birth during the time in shelter to initiate and continue breastfeeding.
- Encourage and facilitate mother-to-mother support so experienced mothers can help less experienced mothers.

Recommendations for how shelter staff and policies can support breastfeeding mothers living in shelter include:⁶

- Provide basic education for shelter staff and volunteer workers to support appropriate infant and young child breastfeeding.
- Address cultural expectations and personal experiences of staff and volunteers that may present barriers to understanding and implementing sound practice.
- Integrate key information about infant and young child feeding needs into routine assessment procedures.
- Include feeding protocols for breastfeeding management and appropriate procurement, use, and handling of infant formula, accompanied by education and training necessary for implementation.
- Identify a network of breastfeeding support including lactation consultants, peer counselors, La Leche League and your local WIC office to which a mother can turn for breastfeeding questions and support.

Summary

Infants living in maternity shelters are a high-risk population for nutrition deficiencies that can be combated with breastfeeding. Mothers in shelters not only need supportive environments to experience success while breastfeeding, they need advocacy to create a comprehensive effort to support breastfeeding in homeless shelter across the United States. The available research is limited which reinforces the need for further advocacy and research to determine the best practices to support breastfeeding mothers in shelters. Policy, systems and environmental changes can be evaluated to create breastfeeding friendly maternity shelters.

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