A Call to Action to Support Continued Breastfeeding

The health benefits of breastfeeding for mother and baby are well known—breast milk is ideally suited to meet the nutritional needs of infants, and it contains disease-fighting antibodies that protect against illness and diseases in both mothers and infants. Studies have also demonstrated that children who are breastfed are less likely to become obese during childhood and adolescence. The economic benefits of breastfeeding are equally substantial—if 90 percent of American families breastfed exclusively for 6 months, the U.S. could save an estimated $13 billion annually from reduced direct medical costs, indirect costs and the cost of premature death. Despite these benefits and recommendations that mothers continue to breastfeed for up to a year, only 43 percent of the 75 percent of mothers who initiate breastfeeding continue to breastfeed at 6 months. This falls short of the Healthy People 2010 target of 50 percent, and the Healthy People 2020 breastfeeding objective, announced in January 2011, increases this target to 60.6 percent.

Health plans have supported breastfeeding among their members through maternity management programs that offer education and support for mothers during the prenatal and postpartum periods. In addition, while coverage varies widely, some women may be eligible for lactation support or breast pump equipment rental/purchase. An updated guide published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Women’s Health is an educational tool health plans can share with mothers to aid in successful breastfeeding. Recommendations from The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding and the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity’s Report to the President present specific actions the health care community, and health plans in particular, can take to support breastfeeding.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

“Your Guide to Breastfeeding” is an easy-to-read publication designed to provide women the information and support they need to breastfeed successfully. The Guide explains why breastfeeding is best and how loved ones can support a mother’s decision to breastfeed. Illustrations and expert tips are designed to aid new mothers in learning how to breastfeed comfortably, and personal stories provide reassurance and encouragement. “Your Guide to Breastfeeding” is available in English, Spanish and Chinese and can be accessed here.

The Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Support Breastfeeding

In this January 2011 report, the Surgeon General presents a call to action for mothers and their families, communities, clinicians, employers, researchers and government leaders to commit to a society-wide approach to support mothers and babies in the initiation and continuation of breastfeeding.

Several of the actions presented in the health care section of the report are applicable to health plans:

- Action 7. Ensure that maternity care practices throughout the United States are fully supportive of breastfeeding.
- Action 8. Develop systems to guarantee continuity of skilled support for lactation between hospitals and health care settings in the community.
- Action 11. Ensure access to services provided by International Board Certified Lactation Consultants (IBCLC).

Under Action 11, the report specifically identifies potential strategies that third party payers can implement to ensure access to services by IBCLCs, such as:
- Include support for lactation as an essential medical service for pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and children. This would entail standard coverage for IBCLCs as “covered providers” when they perform services within the scope of their certification.
- Provide reimbursement for IBCLCs regardless of whether they have professional certification or licensure. One option would be to place IBCLCs within the category of “nursing service related providers” and specify the nature of care they provide so they can be reimbursed without being registered nurses. An alternative option is to develop a state licensure of lactation consultants.

Under Action 8, the report does not specifically call on health plans as potential actors, but the following implementation strategy could certainly be applied to plans given their interactions with primary care providers, hospitals and health care systems.
- Establish partnerships for integrated and continuous follow-up care after discharge from the hospital. Health care systems can ensure that patients are informed about community resources and can facilitate connections to these resources or help to strengthen or create these programs. Resources and programs include peer support networks, breastfeeding clinics, lactation consultants and support groups.

The full report and additional resources can be accessed here.

White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity’s Report to the President

As part of Let’s Move, the First Lady’s comprehensive initiative to solve the problem of obesity within a generation, President Obama established the first-ever Task Force on Childhood Obesity. This task force was asked to develop a coordinated strategy, identify key benchmarks and outline an action plan to reduce the childhood obesity rate to five percent by 2030. The report of the Task Force presents 70 specific recommendations directed at ending the childhood obesity epidemic by focusing on providing a healthy start to life from pregnancy through early childhood, by empowering parents and caregivers to make healthy choices, by serving healthier food in schools, by ensuring access to healthy and affordable food, and by increasing opportunities for physical activity.

The report issues several specific recommendations related to health plans:
- 1.3: Hospitals and health care providers should use maternity care practices that empower new mothers to breastfeed, such as the Baby-Friendly Hospital standards.
This includes ensuring that new mothers receive proper information and support on breastfeeding when they are released from the hospital.

- **1.4:** Health care providers and insurance companies should provide information to pregnant women and new mothers on breastfeeding, including the availability of educational classes, and connect pregnant women and new mothers to breastfeeding support programs to help them make an informed infant feeding decision.

- **1.5:** Local health departments and community-based organizations, working with health care providers, insurance companies, and others should develop peer support programs that empower pregnant women and mothers to get the help they need from other mothers who have breastfed.

The benchmark of success is an increase in breastfeeding rates; according to the National Immunization Survey, 30 percent of babies age nine months or younger are currently breastfed. This percentage should increase by 5 percent every two years so that by 2015 half of all babies will be breastfed for at least nine months.

The full report can be accessed [here](#).

**If your health plan has implemented an innovative breastfeeding promotion effort or program, please consider submitting your effort to NIHCM’s Promising Practices in MCH program.**

3 Ibid.