

Establishing an Advisory Council

As part of the MORE WIC! Project, each State agency subgrantee will form an Advisory Council (referred to as the “council” going forward) that will be engaged at various time points to provide guidance on the project. Forming a council is an approach for designing culturally appropriate outreach strategies that promote equity and enhance community engagement. This practice ensures that the voices of individuals with the most lived experience, and who the project intends to reach, are contributing to the decision-making processes that guide your project in meeting its goals.

This resource is designed to help you propose and then form a productive and engaging council. It outlines how to define the objectives and scope, recruit members, maintain engagement and smooth operations, and establish feedback and assessment mechanisms.

Introduction

Definition and Value of an Advisory Council

An Advisory Council is a group of diverse individuals who meet regularly to offer insights and advice on a project or program improvement. A council embeds the voices of the project’s target population into the project design. This ensures that decisions are reflective of and responsive to their needs.

State agencies should begin by thinking about the voices needed on the council to best suit their project’s needs. State agencies should also ensure that the council reflects the diversity of the WIC-eligible population. The council may be comprised of a variety of types of individuals, examples of which include:

- Current and former WIC participants, including Heads of Households, Proxies, and/or Designees
- WIC-eligible individuals or family members who are receiving SNAP or Medicaid but are not currently enrolled in WIC
- WIC, Medicaid, and/or SNAP-eligible individuals who are not be enrolled
- Direct service WIC staff
- Community-based partners who work in direct service with individuals in the above categories
- Other individuals with lived experience or on-the-ground program expertise

Role of the Advisory Council within the MORE WIC! Project

The council will play a crucial role in efforts to ensure that outreach to WIC-eligible individuals identified in the data matching process is effective and culturally appropriate. The council will be engaged from the beginning stages of outreach design, during outreach, and evaluation, to ensure that the lived experiences of the target audience are centered. Council members can provide insight and feedback on outreach messaging, streamlining enrollment, scheduling protocols, and the acceptability of technology-based solutions within these areas.

The council will be formed in the first year of the project, however the exact timing will depend on your State agency’s previous experience with outreach and preparation to engage in activities as a Learner, Doer, or Leader (as described in the Supplemental Guidance). The council should be formed as early in the project as possible. The expectation is for the council to provide insights on outreach design and testing from the onset before any outreach decisions are made or carried out.

Key Initial Questions

Before establishing a council, the State agency must consider fundamental questions to ensure that the council meets the project objectives. In addition, these questions will be used effectively to ensure respect for the council members' time and expertise. Initial questions should include:

- What is the purpose of the council?
- What topics will the council be asked about?
- What is the composition that represents the community effectively?
- What is the budget for activities and member compensation?
- Who will be responsible for leading and assessing the council's effectiveness?

Other Considerations:

The State agency will also want to consider ways to engage this group as a community so that the relationship does not feel transactional. Examples may include sending members birthday e-cards, planning events for members to connect, or holding virtual or in-person gatherings with members' children

Planning and Establishment

Mission and Objectives

The council should be formed with a clear mission to identify components of the project that can benefit from the council's input. Objectives might include informing and advising on outreach strategy, participating in message testing, and improving the enrollment process.

Scope of Work and Responsibilities

The council's scope of work should be provided to prospective members in the application before they join. The scope of work should outline meeting structures, frequency, location (online or in-person), duration, and responsibilities. Members' responsibilities should be clearly communicated during recruitment as well as at the beginning of the council's tenure. Agencies should specify how the council will advise on project strategies, while also being mindful of their time and other commitments.

Ensure council members have diverse opportunities to engage on the project, considering their unique skills and interests. This will help promote enthusiasm so each member can contribute in a way that aligns with their strengths and priorities.

Size, Duration, and Budget

Deciding on the council's size and tenure will depend on the project's complexity, timeline, and budget. State agencies can also choose to ask council members for their availability before deciding on the duration of the council. Considering council members' availability and interest, you may decide to hold multiple cycles of the council if each cycle's tenure is shorter than the total project timeline. Additionally, State agencies may wish to discuss the feasibility of sustaining the council beyond the MORE WIC! project to advise on WIC outreach and services more generally.

MORE WIC!

Establishing an Advisory Council

Establishing a budget is crucial, and agencies must consider fair compensation for council members' time. This includes factoring in additional supports such as childcare, travel, or technology assistance if necessary. Compensation type will vary by project since each project will have different council members and different time commitments. You can refer to online research incentive calculators to get a sense of how much should be budgeted.

Go the Extra Mile

Showing council members that they are valued can go a long way in building relationships and community.

Recruitment and Onboarding

Recruitment Strategy and Member Selection

A strategic recruitment process should be used to attract a diverse and representative group of council members. This includes creating comprehensive role descriptions, using various outreach methods, and forming a selection committee that upholds [the principles of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging \(EDIB\)](#).

State agencies should work with a variety of partners to recruit members. Partners may include healthcare providers, Head Start, elementary schools, libraries, churches, childcare centers, food banks, organizations serving immigrant communities, and other community-based organizations that serve WIC eligible individuals.

Other strategies to ensure a diverse council:

- **Conduct mass e-mail, text, and mail outreach** to current and former WIC participants inviting them to participate in the council
- **Engage WIC local agencies** – ask them to display recruitment flyers with a QR code in clinic or to ask for the help of their local partners in recruitment efforts
- **Talk to individual local agency WIC staff who work on outreach** – they may know of current or former WIC participants who are active community members or organizers with a large network of contacts who can help get the word out during recruitment
- **Work with your State's SNAP and Medicaid offices** – learn about outreach strategies they may have to reach out to their clients on WIC's behalf

Remember to include diversity in all areas:

race, ethnicity, gender identity, geography (rural, urban, suburban, etc.), type of WIC-eligible individuals or applicants (moms, dads, pregnant individuals, foster parents, grandparents, guardians, etc.), and people of all education and immigration backgrounds.

Onboarding Strategy and Material Packet

A structured onboarding strategy is essential to align members with the council's practices, policies, and expectations. An onboarding packet should be provided, containing: the scope of work, compensation details, State agency-specific paperwork, and media release forms for those involved in public-facing activities.

Keep in mind what documentation you will need to include for them to participate and get paid, as well as any other information they will need. This may include logins to any digital resource/online group, calendar invites for meetings, and contact information for council members and facilitators.

Participation Guidelines

Set clear guidelines for participation that detail the expected time commitment as well as the optional versus required activities. Transparency around consent and privacy in both group and individual sessions will ensure that members feel secure and respected.

Having clear guidelines helps members understand what to expect, but it's equally important to offer flexibility and provide options, especially since many have hectic caretaking schedules.

Advisory Council Operations

Meeting Schedule

The council should operate on a consistent meeting schedule that accommodates members' availability. You may choose to hold two sessions (e.g., a daytime and evening session) to account for differing schedules.

Creating a Safe Space

The council should be a community where members feel comfortable speaking about their experiences and giving open and honest feedback about WIC or other programs, their services, and needed improvements. It's important to create a warm and welcoming environment to build and sustain a high level of trust and safety. Facilitators should focus on building strong connections with council members, while also providing ways for members to get to know one another. Facilitators should also be versed in trauma-informed practices and EDIB principles to promote a respectful and constructive environment for all members.

Ways to Build Community:

- Send members birthday e-cards
- Throw virtual baby showers for the pregnant members
- Host gatherings with members' children so everyone can meet and connect
- Have a virtual Mother's, Father's, or Grandparent's Day celebration

Example

The National WIC Association asks its Participant Advisory Council members to sign a commitment to serve for at least one year, attend meetings at least quarterly, and collaborate on established projects outside of meetings. The commitment also details what members will receive, including compensation and other benefits.

Example

The National WIC Association provides two meeting times for its Participant Advisory Council members, offering flexibility for busy parents. They can choose to attend one or both sessions, depending on what suits their schedule. The selected times were chosen based on member availability.

Go the Extra Mile

Invite engaging guests to select sessions to offer education and training, and networking opportunities for members.

Choosing Topics for Discussion

Get to know the council members and their areas of expertise to inform discussion structure and topics. Understanding members' experience with WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, or other similar programs can help provide context. In early council meetings, ask about members' experience with:

- Accessing and enrolling in WIC, SNAP, or Medicaid (e.g., providing documents, adjunctive eligibility, understanding of enrollment processes)
- Scheduling and attending a WIC appointment (e.g., barriers, timing, virtual vs. in-person, etc.)
- Communicating with WIC or other programs in a language other than English
- Perceptions on benefits of WIC participation, barriers to enrollment, difference between WIC & SNAP, etc.

Determine discussion topics based on the council's scope of work and project needs. Offer a variety of topics so everyone can give their experience and use their talents.

Example topics include:

- **Outreach strategy development**
 - Outreach message modalities: text message, letter, phone call, voice message, WhatsApp, etc.
 - Outreach message crafting: framing, word choice, length, how to address the recipient, perception of the action request, overall clarity and actionability, translation into other languages
 - A/B testing of messages
 - Development of other supporting outreach activities
 - Acceptability of technology-based outreach solutions
- **Outreach strategy evaluation**
 - Assessment of reach and effectiveness of outreach strategy and how it can be improved
 - Troubleshooting setbacks or challenges that arise during outreach
 - Feedback on sustainability of employed outreach strategies
 - Effectiveness of outreach strategies in improving equitable service delivery

Common Concerns and Decision-Making Power

Addressing common concerns proactively and early on will strengthen the council's functionality. Clearly defining the extent of the council's decision-making power will help manage expectations and ensure the council's input is actionable within the organization's capabilities.

Provide context to the council on how it fits within the MORE WIC! project team structure and decision-making processes, and at what points in the project timeline its expertise will be used.

Feedback, Assessment, and Iteration

Continuous Feedback and Effectiveness Assessment

A feedback mechanism should be embedded at the end of the council, or each council cycle, allowing for refinement based on members' experiences. For example, you could finish the term with an anonymous survey or exit interview to give members a final chance to share their experiences. You should also consider conducting a mid-term survey to give members the opportunity to offer feedback on the current council cycle. This may inform changes that need to be implemented to the council experience for the rest of the term. All assessments should be trauma-informed and centered on EDIB to foster an environment of continuous improvement.

Internal Review for Refinement

Regular internal reviews of the council program are necessary to optimize outcomes. Stakeholders should be involved in these reviews to ensure that the program evolves and adapts to meet the changing needs of the members and the project effectively.

Example

The National WIC Association solicits feedback from its council members through an anonymous survey, which asks about their thoughts on the onboarding process, favorite parts of being a council member, ideas for improvements, and areas of interest to guide future cohort cycles. Staff involved with the council meet internally to review survey responses and make improvements accordingly.

Additional Resources

- [Toolkit: How to build a participant advisory council](#), Nava Public Benefit Corporation
- [A Guide to Creating Impactful WIC Research Projects and Collaborating with WIC Agencies](#), National WIC Association
- [Applying Racial Equity to U.S. Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs](#), Bread for the World Institute