

Handling Staff Issues

It can be difficult to find ways to keep staff motivated and well prepared to do nutrition education. Here are some ideas which can help to keep your staff going strong.

- **Training is the key to quality nutrition education.** Make training a routine part of your clinic. Let staff know what the current issues are in nutrition. Make sure that they have training on maternal and child nutrition. Give them information on class management, such as how to best handle a client who wants to do all of the talking or how to present ice breakers. And train them on goal setting, open ended questions and other aspects of individual counseling.
- Train staff well before each new class. Staff who do the training should be enthusiastic and well informed about the lesson. Their attitude will determine the attitude of everyone else teaching the class.

Make sure that the nonprofessional staff understand why the lesson is important to the health of the participants. Your staff's attitude will come through to the clients.

Have the training before starting classes new to the staff. Explain to staff how they will teach each lesson. For instance, the staff needs to know how to do the evaluation and what sections to do in lessons that have choices. Get them to ask questions at the end of a presentation of the class. The questions they ask will help everyone prepare for the client questions. When the staff is well trained and understand what is expected, they will do a better job. The Nutrition Education Coordinator also needs to insure that all supplies for the lesson are in each clinic.

Be sure that the Nutrition Education Coordinator and/or the contract RD observe classes being taught. It will give them the chance to find out what staff are really doing. It will provide them with tips to share with the employees during training on nutrition and teaching.

- Train staff well from the start. They may start out not knowing what to do or what your expectations are. If they do not know your expectations, you will be given theirs. And they may have a very different idea of how to perform their work than you do. Their previous experience and even generational differences may mean that their values and expectations are different than yours.

How can you overcome this? Start new employees out by giving them the vision of what WIC does. Let them know that nutrition education is vital to WIC's purpose. Tell them how the program helps children and families. Then give them your expectations for performance and link them to the vision of WIC's mission and your ideas of their duties and performance. Make sure the expectations are clear to the employee, defined and measurable. Set the bar for performance high in the beginning.

If the situation has been going on for a while, try coaching or mentoring the staff. Make sure that issues which you discuss are important to the job. Do not comment on your own personal irritations. Make sure that your feedback is done in a positive manner and shows compassion. Your attitude should reflect an interest in resolving an issue, not punishing an employee.

Coaching by talking with the staff and letting them problem solve can work well as a staff development tool. This method takes longer, but it can have more lasting results. Be sure if you try problem solving that you know the area of nutrition education very well. It will also help if the staff has had experience in nutrition education that they can apply.

- **Involve staff in planning nutrition education.** Let everyone who is involved in teaching nutrition education help plan next year's schedule of classes. Tell them the results of the participant surveys and the nutritional risk criteria most often used to certify clients in your agency. Then let them help to pick the categorical classes for the next year. You can even have different schedules for different clinic sites. Local agencies which have done this say that staff are more interested in teaching classes and have a better morale when they are part of the planning process.
- **Sometimes staff lack the physical resources to do the job.** This includes equipment, space for classes or counseling, computer access or even the video for the class. Make sure that people have what they need to perform optimally. If you cannot give the resources to them, you may need to change your expectations.