

# **PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING: A TEXAS STUDY OF ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS IN THE GENERAL PUBLIC AND BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) contracted with SUMA/Orchard Social Marketing Inc. to conduct research exploring issues related to public breastfeeding. The research consists of:

- A telephone survey of 1,200 adults representing the general adult population of Texas
- Twenty one-on-one telephone interviews with human resource specialists from companies that operate in Texas
- Five focus groups with owners, managers, and security personnel of local retail stores, restaurants, and other businesses frequented by the public
- Interviews with 39 WIC clients and 20 WIC breastfeeding peer counselors who were breastfeeding or had recently breastfed

Most respondents in all target audiences supported a woman's right to breastfeed in public as long as she is covered up or discreet. A notable number of interviewees mentioned bathrooms as a place where women should breastfeed; many did not seem to consider a bathroom an inappropriate place to feed a baby. Most respondents agreed, however, that more private places specifically designed for breastfeeding mothers should be available in public places.

## **ATTITUDES: POLICIES REGARDING PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING AND DECALS SUPPORTING PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING**

Business respondents did not view breastfeeding in public as an issue that requires formal policies, breastfeeding-friendly decals, or a promotional campaign. Employees and customers who breastfeed did not appear to be a concern for most companies represented in the study. Few of the companies had created policies to allow employees to express milk while on the job, and few had created policies for customers. Most would prefer to use discretion in handling individual situations as they occur. A "mother-friendly" designation by the state seemed to hold little interest for the companies in the study.

In the survey conducted with the general public, respondents who had breastfed in public or who had partners who had breastfed in public or who were

expecting their first child were significantly more likely to likely to feel “very comfortable” breastfeeding in a business establishment that identified itself as being breastfeeding friendly with a decal or sign versus breastfeeding in an establishment that did not.

The concept of a “Breastfeeding Welcome Here” decal was also popular with all of the peer counselors and 94% of the 39 WIC clients who participated in the study.

### **BUSINESS REPRESENTATIVES’ FEEDBACK ON THE “BREASTFEEDING WELCOME HERE” DECAL AND THE FACT SHEET TARGETED TO BUSINESSES**

Business representatives in focus groups suggested dropping the term “breast milk” from the “Breastfeeding Welcome Here” decal. Managers of restaurants were particularly opposed to the term. They said it sounded as if breast milk were a menu item. Some respondents found the fact sheet on breastfeeding benefits for businesses helpful and particularly liked the information about the law. They said other verbiage on the fact sheet was confusing.

### **BUSINESS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF INCIDENTS SPARKED BY PUBLIC BREASTFEEDING**

Business representatives reported few customer complaints related to breastfeeding. Most had never had a problem with employees expressing milk. Corporate locations appeared to be more likely than retail locations to be breastfeeding-friendly and have space available for a lactation room. Space and time were cited as the greatest challenges to offering breastfeeding support to female employees.

Only two in 10 respondents had heard of anyone being asked to leave an establishment because of breastfeeding. Only 1% had heard of a woman being arrested for breastfeeding. None of the business representatives or human-resource specialists was aware of a woman being arrested for breastfeeding. Business representatives in focus groups did report some incidents sparked by breastfeeding; security staff were the most likely to be involved in such incidents. But the incidents were few considering the number of businesses and years of business/management experience represented in the focus groups.

Of the 39 WIC clients interviewed, 86% reported no negative experiences breastfeeding in public, while 60% of the 20 peer counselors interviewed reported a negative experience, mainly feelings of being stared at or not having a proper place to breastfeed. Although few WIC clients reported negative experiences breastfeeding in public, 90% of peer counselors said clients frequently express concerns related to breastfeeding in public.

Almost two-thirds of WIC clients (64%) and peer counselors (65%) indicated that the duration of their breastfeeding was not affected by how comfortable they felt about breastfeeding in public.

### **KNOWLEDGE OF THE LAW**

Some of the business representatives and none of the human-resource specialists were aware of laws in Texas regarding breastfeeding. Survey findings from the general public show that few were aware of any state law that governs where and when mothers may breastfeed in public. Most people with children under age 18 did not believe that the State of Texas has a law regarding breastfeeding. Of the 39 WIC clients interviewed, 72% reported not knowing about the law, although 95% of the peer counselors interviewed said they counsel clients that breastfeeding in public is legal and 65% said they distribute the “License to Breastfeed” card. (The sample of peer counselors in the study was from across the state, while the WIC clients were from one geographic location. Therefore, application of the findings from the client group related to education on the breastfeeding law is limited.)

### **KNOWLEDGE OF THE BREASTFEEDING**

Most respondents in all of the target audiences knew that breastfeeding is healthier for the baby, but they were much less knowledgeable about all the benefits for the baby and for the mother. Eight of 10 respondents recalled unaided that breastfeeding is better for the baby’s health or that it helps build immunities. Many respondents in all audiences were surprised to learn that breastfeeding can help prevent sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), certain cancers, diabetes, and obesity. Most had very little knowledge of the number of benefits for mothers. Some business representatives in the focus groups questioned the sources and validity of this information.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Beyond the fact that breastfeeding is best, most respondents know little about the benefits to mother and baby about breastfeeding; knowledge of the Texas breastfeeding law is nominal at best. The findings of this research point to the following strategies and campaign elements to increase support for public breastfeeding:**

- Base efforts to increase breastfeeding-friendly business environments on targeting businesses with information about the economic benefits to the company of offering a breastfeeding-friendly environment for employees and patrons. Businesses are most motivated to promote breastfeeding-

friendly environments by the economic benefits. Campaign materials should cite specific examples of companies that have reduced medical costs or maternal absenteeism by being breastfeeding-friendly, and should detail the savings to the company.

- Educate the public and businesses about the inappropriateness of breastfeeding or expressing milk in a bathroom that does not have a separate lounge. Model the campaign after the Australian campaign which features a business man eating in a bathroom stall with the tagline, “You wouldn’t eat here. So why should a baby?” Encourage businesses and public places such as malls to designate a specific area other than a bathroom for women to breastfeed.
- Promote knowledge among businesses and the public about the Texas law protecting a mother’s right to breastfeed her baby in any location in which the mother is authorized to be.
- Prominently display a poster in every WIC clinic that states this law.
- Develop a targeted approach to educating security companies about laws protecting a woman’s right to breastfeed and appropriate ways to handle complaints or concerns about a woman breastfeeding in public.
- Offer greater support to women who breastfeed by promoting supportive tools. Expand the promotion-of-the-pump program. Explore partnering with companies that can offer WIC clients discounts on items that make it easier for women to breastfeed in public, such as breastfeeding bras, baby slings, and front packs. Demonstrate in classes how to use items such as these to breastfeed discreetly in public.
- Consider abandoning or taking a limited approach with the concept of the “Breastfeeding Welcome Here” decal. A limited approach could target one popular business, such as Starbucks or Wal-Mart, to pilot a campaign with the decal. The pilot would provide a better understanding of the time and effort required to undertake such a campaign. Gaining the involvement of one high-profile business with multiple locations could also be leveraged to gain the involvement of other businesses.
- If the “Breastfeeding Welcome Here” decal is used, drop the term “breast milk.”
- In any campaign effort aimed at the public or businesses, promote ALL the benefits of breastfeeding for baby and mother. When possible, cite the

source for breastfeeding facts, such as the American Pediatric Society. Increasing knowledge of the benefits will increase support for public breastfeeding.

- Rewrite the Texas Department of State Health Services breastfeeding fact sheet for businesses to more clearly promote the benefits to business.
- Recognizing the enormity of the task and that it cannot be accomplished by WIC alone, local WIC staff should be encouraged to take an active role in the formation and leadership in “healthy mother, healthy baby” type coalitions to raise public awareness of the benefits of breastfeeding and the law.