



RECOMMENDATIONS ON INCREASING BREASTFEEDING IN THE LOW-WAGE WORKSITE

CALIFORNIA WORKING FAMILIES POLICY SUMMIT
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INTRODUCTION

Breastfeeding has been well established worldwide as a low-cost, low-tech preventive intervention with far-reaching benefits for mothers and babies and significant cost savings for health providers and employers. Increasing breastfeeding rates among low-income women is therefore a key strategy for health improvement in general—and particularly for the prevention of childhood obesity.

In the face of intensified direct marketing of infant formula, inadequate infant-feeding policies in healthcare systems, and poor worksite supports, attempts to increase the exclusivity and duration of breastfeeding among low-income women will not be successful without a more comprehensive approach. Efforts to change policies and norms in low-wage worksites and communities are badly needed. Like the rest of the nation, California has an increasingly high percentage of working women with infants and young children at home; many of these women are in low-wage employment. State data show that 51% of working women age 18 to 64 earned low wages in 2007. These women are more likely to have jobs that lack healthcare benefits, have little flexibility, and provide only unpaid sick leave, inflexible work schedules, and no job security.

Compared to other countries, in the United States mothers and families are provided very little or no paid leave after the birth of a baby, depending on their employer and employee status. California workers fare slightly better, with some employees receiving six weeks of partial pay for maternity leave; however, in many cases, and particularly for mothers in low-wage jobs, there is no guaranteed job upon their return. As a result, many low-income mothers must return to work when their infants are only six weeks old—often an inadequate amount of time to bond and establish a milk supply. Even mothers who do not return to work until their infants are a few months old are challenged to sustain breastfeeding.

The challenge of continuing to breastfeed is even greater for the mother in a low-wage worksite. These women have fewer of the workplace amenities afforded a professional mother, such as a private office to pump her milk, a refrigerator to store her milk, flex time or the option to telecommute. Studies indicate mothers working full time are more likely than those working part time either not to initiate breastfeeding or to terminate breastfeeding early.

Given the challenges, only the most determined working poor mothers persist with breastfeeding upon return to work. To do so involves using a breast pump (often loaned or supplied by the local WIC office) to express milk at regular intervals while at work, storing the milk in clean bottles, and then transporting it home for later feedings. Without regular use of a breast pump during the day, a mother's milk supply will diminish, and breastfeeding will be compromised.

Returning to work should not spell the end of breastfeeding for low-income mothers. These women should be provided the same civil protections and legally required accommodation that is being provided to white-collar professionals who breastfeed—a private place and adequate time to express their milk—as well as clean storage, supportive supervisors, and respectful co-workers.

POLICY OBJECTIVE #1

Strengthen and enforce the existing lactation accommodation law.

Background

To continue providing breast milk for her infant while working, a lactating mother must have an employer who will accommodate her needs. Studies document significant savings from lower healthcare costs, reduced absenteeism, lower employee turnover, higher productivity and loyalty, and positive public relations.

Fortunately, the California Labor Code Section 1030-33 (AB 1025, passed in 2001), requires all employers to provide a private place that is not a toilet stall for a mother to pump her milk and a reasonable amount of time to do so. Unfortunately, not enough employers, particularly employers of low-wage workers, are fully implementing this law; and they are jeopardizing many mothers' valiant efforts to sustain breastfeeding. Many California employers are either unaware of the law or out of compliance and do not provide for or inform mothers of worksite lactation accommodation. Employers who have accommodated worksite lactation have done so mostly for professional workers.

Some employers, including low-wage employers, are beginning to provide for lactation accommodation, including a private place to pump and flex time to do so. Lactation accommodation should be part of company policies and offered as part of employee benefits. Studies on comprehensive corporate lactation programs prove that lactation support improves breastfeeding duration and exclusivity.

Unfortunately, for many mothers, attempting to pump milk at work is impractical and extremely stressful. These women are determined to provide the best food for their infants—it is their employers' responsibility to support them. **Lactation accommodation needs to be available for all working mothers.**

Recommended Actions

State-Level

- A.** The Governor should immediately promulgate an Executive Order requiring all state agencies to provide lactation accommodation for all state employees.
- B.** The Legislature should strengthen current law by increasing penalties for employer noncompliance, and by requiring employers to inform pregnant employees about the law when they discuss their maternity leave benefits.
- C.** The websites of the State Labor Commission and Department of Fair Employment and Housing should be updated with user-friendly materials on the lactation accommodation law and how to file a complaint.
- D.** The State Labor Commissioner should enter into a public-private partnership to implement a social marketing campaign to inform employers and mothers about their rights and responsibilities under the state lactation accommodation code.
- E.** CalWORKs should ensure that employers provide lactation support for breastfeeding employees, and that employees are aware of their right to workplace lactation accommodation, as required by law.

County-Level

- F.** Absent state leadership, city and county employers need to take the lead in providing lactation accommodation at all worksites.
- G.** County human services departments should ensure that employment and training or "workfare" program policies do not result in reduced breastfeeding among participants.

Employer and Community Responsibilities

- H.** Human resource associations should provide employers with samples of standard written policies for lactation accommodation and information.
- I.** Employers should be required to develop written policies for worksite lactation accommodation and to give information on lactation accommodation to employees upon employment or maternity leave.
- J.** Employers should include lactation accommodation as part of Work-Family Life Benefits and include information about it in human resource management programs.

For more information about these recommendations, contact:
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