

# Arizona WIC Program Serves the Needs of Women and Children

By Susan Lanier-Graham



left to right: Mary Bookman, Bryan Mitchell, Karen Sell, Linda Yee, Kay Killion and William Korpela.

The Arizona WIC Program is a Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC). Through 20 local agencies in 15 counties, including community health centers, county health departments, and an American Indian Tribe, the Arizona WIC Program provides services to over 156,000 women, infants and children who receive nutrition and breastfeeding education, referral to health and social services and supplemental foods.

WIC is one of the most successful United States Department of Agriculture programs because of its collaborative partners who ensure the program accomplishes its mission.

**Q:** WIC provides services to thousands of women. How did you come to this position and why?

**A:** Nutrition services are a way of providing both prevention and intervention care. In 1971, I started my career as a hospital based clinical dietitian. I educated patients both in the hospital and through outpatient clinics about their dietary needs in relation to their health and medical problems such as diabetes. In this role, I prepared individuals and family members to live with their illnesses, and use diet therapy to prevent complications.

In 1983, I was offered the opportunity to work as a local agency nutritionist in WIC for two county

health departments in rural Missouri. I became interested in preventing people from becoming sick, and the WIC program and other public health nutrition programs emphasize prevention, which includes the adoption of good dietary and health habits. Research has shown that good nutrition and health habits/behaviors can prevent or delay the onset of certain diseases and ensure the optimum growth and development of infants and children.

When we moved to Arizona in 1985, I applied for a WIC position with the Arizona Department of Health Services and worked as a Public Health Nutrition Consultant to WIC local agencies throughout the state. I continued to train and develop skills that lead me to the program director's position.

My interest in providing preventative nutrition services has become a passion, which the WIC program allows me the opportunity to explore. I would like to provide the nutrition information needed to young women and families to ensure optimum growth and health for all members.

**Q:** WIC is an enormous program in Arizona. Can you give us an overview of the management team and the responsibilities of each?

**A:** There are four essential WIC teams and leaders:

- **Vendor Management.** Mary Bookman, Vendor Management Team Manager, is responsible for the selection, training, and management of the food delivery system

- **Program Integrity.** Bill Korpela, Special Investigation Compliance Supervisor, has compliance and quality assurance oversight of local agencies, employees, vendors, and participants

- **Community Nutrition Services.** Linda Yee, Community Nutrition Services Manager, is responsible for the management, training, and oversight of local agencies

- **Management Information Services.** Rod Setnes, Management Information Systems Manager, is responsible for the development and maintenance of the data automation system, Arizona in Motion

**Q:** Tell us about the size and scope of WIC in Arizona.

**A:** The Arizona WIC Program has grown 20% in the last four years. It is expected to expand due to the tremendous growth in Arizona. Nationally, WIC is now serving over 8 million participants monthly.

Currently the Arizona WIC Program is only serving 37% of the potentially eligible population at 156,000 per month. While the program provides services to 60% of all infants born in Arizona each

year, it still needs to develop additional services in Maricopa and Pima County to meet the needs of additional participants.

**Q:** How has that growth changed the program?

**A:** As the program has grown, so has the need for new local agencies to provide services. The rapid growth of the program has been a terrific burden on the current infrastructure. There is and has been a need to utilize new technology to provide WIC services in a more efficient and effective manner.

The development and implementation of the Arizona in Motion database system has improved operations, simplified certification and the delivery and printing of food instruments on demand. Without this data and financial management system, it would be very difficult for the Arizona WIC Program to manage its continued growth, and delivery of WIC services to more than 156,000 women, infants and children monthly in the 15 counties in Arizona. Currently WIC provides services in 120 different clinics by over 450 employees. Without portable computers and printers, staff would not be able to travel to rural sites and provide services to many who are far from the major towns. Future technology improvements are essential to managing our growth.

**Q:** WIC has introduced the Smart Card in other States such as Texas. Can you explain the cards and why they are important to WIC?

**A:** This is one of the new technologies we use. It is like a gift card you would purchase, only with more memory and capacity. The card contains a computer chip embedded inside that stores information about the participant and enrolled family members. The card stores their WIC food package(s) information in a family package by total amounts, and allows participants to interact with in-store technology at each visit. This means the participant can visit the store as much as they want and buy in smaller quantities such as one gallon of milk.

Think of the Smart Card as a debit or credit card with memory. It is used at the store by the participant to determine the available foods in their food packages and obtain a shopping list for the visit. For the vendor, it identifies the WIC participant and ensures the vendor receives payment each time the individual shops.

This technology offers much more flexibility at the point of purchase as participants do not have to use food instruments, and all editing of the purchase is automated eliminating many of the current redemption concerns and problems.

**Q:** In addition to food assistance, what other services does WIC provide to clients?

**A:** The Arizona WIC Program provides nutrition and breastfeeding education along with referral to social and health services. It also provides peer counseling breastfeeding support in five of the fifteen counties and assists those participants in many different ways.

**Q:** What is your vision or plan to improve the delivery of WIC services to the client? Are there any improvements in store for the Retailers/Vendors?

**A:** The Arizona WIC Program would like to continue to develop its use of technology to improve point of sale services. In the future, we would like to evaluate the use of electronic benefits transfer system (EBT) to determine which of the two types—Magnetic

strip or Smart Card technology—offers the most opportunity for the Arizona WIC Program to use this new technology in Arizona grocery stores.

EBT systems offer the vendor community and WIC new opportunities to improve the delivery of WIC foods and vendor services to participants. They would receive a family food package, and more access to purchasing what they want, when they want it, and in varying sizes and volumes. The vendor would be paid electronically, and on demand. As the technology improves, WIC can streamline the store transactions.

**Q:** How do you keep vendors informed as changes occur in the program?

**A:** The vendors receive mailings from the program called Vendor Alerts, we maintain a website, and work with the Arizona Food Marketing Alliance quarterly to distribute information to vendors. We encourage vendors to visit our website at [www.AZWIC.gov](http://www.AZWIC.gov) to get detailed information under the Vendors heading. There is information on how to apply to become a new vendor and details of the existing program.

**Q:** You mentioned that WIC works with AFMA on a quarterly basis. Can you explain that and the impact it has had on vendor relations?

**A:** Meeting quarterly with the vendor community at the AFMA office has enabled the Arizona WIC Program to collaborate on current management issues such as the implementation of new vendor rules, changes in products, and improvements in service delivery. This exchange of information and ideas is essential to maintaining good operations and systems.

Knowing the needs and opinions of the vendors and sharing WIC needs has improved relations and built essential partnerships that have achieved successes in implementation of new policies and solved many concerns for both the vendors and program staff.

**Q:** What types of training do you supply vendors and their employees?

**A:** Training is provided to new stores and existing vendors on a face-to-face basis on all aspects of food delivery. The vendor manual and other materials are specifically developed to provide the information needed by the vendor to meet our program requirements.

In the future, we will provide on demand training for all staff from our new web-based learning system. The Arizona WIC Program is looking at how to meet the vendors' needs using electronic training modules and on demand resources available on the WIC website.

**Q:** Do vendors ever find minimum stock requirements difficult to maintain? What is the reasoning behind the numbers?

**A:** WIC established minimum stock requirements to ensure that when a participant shops, there is authorized WIC food on the store shelves. Setting the amount at two food packages for women and children and four infant packages ensures that expectations are met when participants enter a store to obtain food. Many of the WIC participants have limited resources and find transportation one of their biggest barriers to obtaining services. With the minimum stock requirement, WIC is trying to ensure participant access to authorized supplemental foods. The food package is really a food prescription of essential nutrients and we want to ensure that our participants have the food they

need for their health and nutritional needs.

**Q:** You have a hotline for vendors and participants. What are the most common complaints and how do you deal with them?

**A:** The Arizona hotline is 1-866-229-6561. The most common complaint from vendors and participants is about customer service related issues. Communications between participants and vendors and vendors and participants is sometimes difficult. If a client's expectations are not met, they will complain about a lack of formula or new juices. Cashiers are concerned about how the participant shops and this information is being used to redesign our participant education.



### Karen Sell

Nutrition Services Manager, Arizona Department of Health Services, Office of Chronic Disease Prevention and Nutrition Services

**Education:** B.A. in Nutrition and Food Technology/Dietetics from San Diego State University. Internships at Mercy Hospital and Medical Center in San Diego. Post graduate studies at Southwest Missouri State University. Accelerated Leadership Development Program, W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University.

**Career:** Started her career in 1971 as a hospital-based clinical dietitian then became a local agency nutritionist for WIC in rural Missouri in 1983. In 1986, Ms. Sell joined the Arizona WIC Program staff as a Project Nutrition Consultant. In August 1990, she was promoted to the WIC Coordinator's position and was responsible for the daily operations of the Arizona WIC Program. She held that position until she became Health Systems Director for the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc. where she directed the ITCA Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Pregnancy and Pediatric Nutrition Surveillance Systems and other health programs. In October 2002, she assumed her current position as Nutrition Programs Manager/WIC Director for the Arizona WIC Program.

**Skill or trait that has helped most during career:** Dedication and fortitude

**Personal:** Married for 35 years to Bob Sell. She has two children: Terri Wattawa and Robert Sell

**Hero:** Florence Nightingale