



FEEDING KIDS AND FAMILIES CASEY DISCUSSES WIC WITH MOMS, ADVOCATES

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WIC client Maria Marcellin shares her story with Sen. Bob Casey during a roundtable discussion on the benefits of the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) program and Casey's legislation to increase the cut-off age from five to six years-old.

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The Foundation for Delaware County hosted a roundtable discussion with U.S. Sen. Bob Casey (D-PA) Monday in Springfield. The topic discussed was the

Women, Infant, and Children (WIC), Healthy Start, and Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) programs, their benefits to families, and the need for more funding and an extension for children whose birthdays are after August.

Casey will soon introduce WIC-related legislation to: extend eligibility for children to age six and extend certification periods for infants and women.

His legislation would close the gap on the length of time children face not receiving nutritional supplement while enrollment into their schools is pending. Once in school, they would qualify for free breakfast and lunch.

Joanne Craig, the Foundation's vice president, said the WIC program teaches families about nutrition, early childhood growth and development, and offers access to financial resources to help support them. She said the program primarily serves low-income families and often come from diverse backgrounds.

"There's not enough money to go around when you are buying diapers and taking care of your household," Craig said. "Having the opportunity to connect with a program like WIC is just an awesome thing." Frances Sheehan, president of the Foundation, said the program has three sites: Springfield (the WIC headquarters), Upper Darby, and Chester and serves over 9,000 families in Delco.

Keshla Cruz, a client of the WIC and Healthy Start programs in Chester with three children, said she is grateful to have WIC.

“It is very helpful because my son is autistic and he doesn’t eat table foods. WIC provides checks for fruits [and vegetables] and he loves to eat that and Cheerios,” Cruz said during the discussion. “I had WIC since I was pregnant with my son, and needing vitamins, they helped me get all that I needed. I know that if I hadn’t had WIC, I wouldn’t have gotten through all that I had to go through.”

Cruz said WIC helps a lot because can buy foods her children love to eat. She said their happiness is her happiness.

The WIC program provides services such as nutritious foods, nutrition counseling, breastfeeding information and support, health and nutrition screenings, and more according to the Foundation’s website.

The website also says the NFP program offers support by having program nurses visit women and assist them from early pregnancy until the child is two years old. Nurses monitor physical and mental health of the mother and teach them about topics such as child health and development, positive parenting, bonding, and more. They also teach parents to be self-sufficient economically “by developing visions for their future, continue their education or find work.”

Tremaine Hobson, also a former WIC client and former NFP client-turned employee, said WIC was available for her when she needed it most. She said she believes the WIC program is exceptional because it gives what a child needs and supports clients’ needs.

“WIC helped me with the nutritious part in me trying to be healthy. When I was pregnant with my daughter, I had pre-eclampsia and I didn’t know I had (it),” Hobson said. “My daughter didn’t want breast milk and WIC helped by giving what my child needed. The formula itself was very expensive and WIC was willing to give us the different brands that my child needed.”

Hobson said she was a WIC and NFP client until she joined NFP as an employee, around the time her daughter was about a year-old. Hobson celebrates three years with NFP in October.

Another WIC client, Michele Berry, said she raised her 11 year-old son for the first five years of his life alone and, without WIC, she “doesn’t know how I would have gotten through anything without (WIC’s) help.” Berry, who graduates with her bachelors degree next June, said that now with her one-year-old, although the obstacles are different, WIC is still a tremendous help.

“With me going back to school and doing better for myself, WIC is allowing me to pay for my school and feed my kids properly,” Berry said. “It is a huge help. I wouldn’t have gotten through the first year paying for formula out of pocket, going to school, and working part-time.”

Berry said the WIC program never makes clients feel uninformed.

Casey said what he got from clients’ testimonies was that “counseling is needed some days much more than just the food.” He was also impressed that WIC teaches women and families about nutrition; “Even kids who are well off don’t learn those basic lessons” of eating healthy, Casey said.

Filomena Ahlefeld, program director at WIC, said only about 51 percent of Pennsylvania’s eligible population is serviced by their programs. She said Delaware County’s caseload is about 9,600 clients and that client rates are dropping.

“(WIC) reaches a broad amount of people. Here in Delaware County, we see a lot of small business owners and a lot of working families that come to the program and are eligible,” Ahlefeld said. “Another thing we teach is budgeting. If you’re eligible, why not take advantage of this and put that toward your son or daughter’s college fund or other things you may need.”

Ahlefeld said WIC does a lot of grassroots campaigns; visiting daycare and welfare centers, and other avenues to get clients to join the program.

Maria Marcellin, also a client of WIC, said she sees the effects of poverty not only from first-hand experience, but also as a social worker. She said child development is very important and if moms are stressed out, their babies can feel that and become stressed as well.

“It is not an investment in the short-term table setting for these families,” Marcellin said. “It changes communities because of how strong these families can be with this help. It’s beautiful.”

Casey said his main legislative goal is to highlight the importance of WIC and the reality that kids benefit from it. He wants to stop kids getting cut off the program because of their age.

“In some school districts where (a child) might turn five and have a nutrition gap, they still need the benefit of WIC up to age six,” Casey said. “Getting one person from the other side to agree to this is a big breakthrough. That’s the difference between a bill being introduced or stopped from being introduced.”

Casey said clients’ testimonies give value and meaning to the program. He said 11,863 children statewide were removed from WIC after turning age five from October 2017 to last June 30, missing the nutritional supplement offered by WIC.

“We have to do the best job we can,” Craig said. “We have one chance with that child to help that child get off to the best start. WIC is really at the foundation of that.”