

Implementing IYCF Counseling Centers in Bihar

BACKGROUND

Bihar is greatly challenged by a low rate of recommended infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices. For example, only 30 percent of newborns are breastfed within one hour, and only 29 percent of children are exclusively breastfed for the first six months in Bihar (Government of India 2014). Poor breastfeeding practices alone lead to 800,000 child deaths each year in Bihar—almost 12 percent of all child deaths in the state (Aga Khan 2015). Optimal IYCF practices are urgently needed in the health facilities and at the community level.

In response to this situation, in May 2014, UNICEF in partnership with the Anugrah Narayan Magadh Medical College & Hospital (ANMMCH) and the Civil Surgeon (CS) office began establishing IYCF counseling centers at the college and in 21 blocks of Gaya district, which was one of the poorest performing districts in terms of IYCF practices. The objective of the centers was to help all mothers achieve the skills and knowledge required to maintain optimal IYCF practices with a focus on complementary feeding.

APPROACHES AND METHODS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

After an assessment of the state of nutrition interventions in Gaya showed the low rate of IYCF practices, partners decided that IYCF counseling centers should be set up in all health facilities of Gaya to promote optimal infant feeding.

The UNICEF Bihar office provided managerial support, and the ANMMCH and the CS office worked to strengthen IYCF practices in the centers. The first two IYCF counseling centers were established at the ANMMCH in May 2014, and then other centers were established in all the remaining public health facilities of Gaya during June 2014. There are now 24 IYCF counseling centers in Gaya under the administrative supervision of the Health Department.

Each IYCF counseling center has a private area for clients with one dedicated, certified IYCF counselor. The centers are outfitted with all the essential equipment required for anthropometric measurements and IYCF counseling. The IYCF counselors perform growth monitoring and communicate these measurements to the parents. If required, they refer malnourished children to the National Rehabilitation Center.

At the IYCF center, the counselor shows mothers how to prepare the food for children age six months to two years from the six food groups and teaches them about age-appropriate feeding. For pregnant women in their third trimester, the IYCF counselor discusses early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding, and also provides support in the delivery room in initiating breastfeeding. Counselors maintain the records of all the beneficiaries with a unique identification number, which was developed by the ANMMCH in coordination with the State Health Society, Bihar, and UNICEF. This same number is recorded on the Mother and

Child Protection card that helps to track mothers for follow-up.

KEY FINDINGS

To date, 75,338 beneficiaries have been counseled on optimal IYCF practices in the IYCF counseling centers established in Gaya. These include pregnant women in their third trimester (33,795), mothers of zero- to five-month olds (22,620), and mothers of six- to 23-month olds (18,923).

At the outset, the major challenges were having enough skilled counselors and ensuring that all target beneficiaries were referred to the centers. To address these issues, counselors were selected and then trained for seven days on IYCF counseling, so that they had the necessary competencies to counsel mothers in IYCF practices. Second, a special stamp was designed to ensure that all children under the age of two years coming to the health facility were directed to visit the IYCF counseling center.

Supportive supervision includes monthly visits by officials from the State Health Society to assess the functioning of the IYCF center by using a checklist and providing one-on-one support to the counselors. During the visit, the supervisor scores various indicators on the checklist related to optimal IYCF practices. There is a monthly meeting of supervisors from across the district, and the facility with the best score receives a reward from the Civil Surgeon and Regional Deputy Director.

UNICEF is planning to conduct an evaluation of the entire model in coordination with Alive & Thrive in the coming months. Even without a formal evaluation, the following lessons have been noted:

- Having an exclusive counselor for the IYCF counseling center is important to make the center effective. Using other counselors (for example, those dedicated to maternal child health or family planning) to do additional jobs decreases the impact of the counseling.
- Counseling is more effective when the counselors are female, speak the local language, and are familiar with the culture.
- It is critical to build in regular refresher counselor training.
- User-friendly job aids and audiovisual communications material help to reinforce the important messages with clients.
- Regular reporting and data analysis should also be an important part of initial training.

WAY FORWARD

IYCF counselors are now a known face in the hospital and in other health facilities in Gaya where mothers regularly bring their children for growth monitoring and counseling related to breastfeeding and complementary feeding. As a result of this initiative, ANMMCH is soon going to be declared as a bottle-feeding-free zone. In recognition of this approach, the State Health Society of Bihar has established 36 additional IYCF counseling centers in 36 first referral units of 10 other high-priority districts, and has also proposed a budget for dedicated IYCF counselors for 10 district hospitals.

REFERENCES

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Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI)

One World South Asia

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Dar, S., R. Jha, S. Sinha, B. B. Singh, and G. Kumar. 2015. *Implementing IYCF Counseling Centers in Bihar*. POSHAN Implementation Note No. 11. New Delhi: International Food Policy Research Institute.

ABOUT POSHAN

Partnerships and Opportunities to Strengthen and Harmonize Actions for Nutrition in India (POSHAN) is a 4-year initiative that aims to build evidence on effective actions for nutrition and support the use of evidence in decisionmaking. It is supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and led by IFPRI in India.

ABOUT IMPLEMENTATION NOTES

Implementation Notes summarize experiences related to how specific interventions or programs are delivered. They are intended to share information on innovations in delivery and are not research products.

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