

### North Dakota Health Department Embraces Healthy Maternity Policies in Workplace

*Comprehensive maternity policies at the North Dakota Department of Health set high standards to promote wellness for mothers returning to the workplace.*

Infant-related [policies](#) at the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDH) allow mothers and fathers to smoothly transition back to work after a birth, adoption, or foster care placement without jeopardizing their infants' well-being. Since early 1996, the infant at work policy has fostered a family-friendly atmosphere at NDDH. In response to the Affordable Care Act (ACA), nursing accommodation policies were recently revised to be more comprehensive for new mothers. Mothers or fathers may also choose to take a 12-week unpaid family and medical leave of absence. Through continuous monitoring and a willingness to share policies and best practices, NDDH sets an excellent example in worksite wellness for new mothers and ensuring a healthy start for North Dakota families.

#### Steps Taken:

##### *Infant at Work Policy*

NDDH initiated and served as the pilot agency for the state's infant at work policy. The program's goal is to enable mothers and fathers to return to work earlier, ease the child care concerns that new parents often experience and support breastfeeding for those mothers who choose to breastfeed. Both female and male employees can request to bring their infant to work during regular office hours following childbirth, an adoption, or foster care placement. Infants in the workplace must be six months old or younger, and approval must be requested from the division director prior to bringing in an infant. The employee and other parent (or guardian) is also required to sign a liability waiver, indemnification form, and medical release forms. Employees participating in the program are responsible for supplying appropriate furnishings for their infant, such as cribs, playpens, or swings in their work area, and are also responsible for maintaining a safe environment for their infant. If an employee is scheduled to travel for work, out of state or locally, he or she is responsible for making child care arrangements or obtaining permission to bring their child with them if the situation allows. Each employee utilizing the infant at work policy is also required to complete a review at the conclusion of six months.

##### *Lactation Policies*

NDDH's comprehensive lactation policies were originally developed in 1996 along with the infant at work policy and were revised after ACA's passage in 2009. ACA amended section seven of the Fair Labor Standards Act to require employers to provide reasonable break times during work hours, for up to one year following childbirth, for mothers to express breast milk for nursing infants. Furthermore, employers must provide employees with a private space that is protected from the view and intrusion to express breast milk. This space must not be a private restroom or toilet stall.

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- NDDH Employee, 2013  
KFYR-TV Interview

NDDH responded to the new regulations by working with facilities management to secure an appropriate lactation space for new mothers in the state capitol building. Additional collaborations were needed from the North Dakota Office of Management and Budget to identify the lactation space. All employees or visiting moms are welcome to express milk in this private, calm, and relaxing atmosphere. Using American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds, NDDH was able to purchase comfortable chairs, a small table and a privacy room divider (in case more than one mother is using the space). NDDH provides a hospital grade electric breast pump for the room (mothers must bring their own tubing kits). The space has electrical outlets and is close to a clean water source. NDDH employees are welcome to pump in their offices if desired. In addition, mothers who continue to breastfeed their babies after six months of age are allowed flexible work schedules for up to one year. Employees who exceed the normal break times are able to come to work earlier or stay at work later than scheduled.

### Results:

State Health Officer, **Terry Dwelle, MD, MPH** states “Knowing that employees can bring their babies to work for a few months helps new parents transition back into the workplace after a birth. Plus, seeing babies at work with their parents brightens the day for many of us.”

While NDDH has not kept track of how many parents have used the infants at work option, this past year about 10 parents brought their infants to work. It is not uncommon to have a number of parents participating at the same time. NDDH’s experience has been that colleagues know and understand the difficulty of being a mother and an employee at the same time and are there to help at any given moment. Steps have been taken to ensure open communication and minimal disruption during the work day for both participating and non-participating employees. Although the policy indicates that ill or fussy infants may be removed from the worksite if they are disruptive for long periods of time, supervisors and employees are encouraged to discuss any disruptions on an as-needed basis. NDDH recognizes the policy may not be suitable for every employee or every work environment, but the 18 year track record shows very few instances where an infant could not remain in the work setting.

Personal testimonies from employees at NDDH highlight the success of the infant at work policies. In January 2013, two NDDH employees were [interviewed](#) by KYFR-TV, a local news station in Bismarck, North Dakota. New mother Lindsey VanderBusch spoke on the infant at work policy, saying, “You sit and think, as you’re on a national conference call with your baby sitting on your lap, how lucky you are to be the modern mother with your child with you at work.”

Initial concerns about NDDH’s infant at work policy stemmed from fears that infants would disrupt workplace productivity. These misconceptions were quickly mitigated because employees experienced few problems with infants in the workplace. VanderBusch’s coworker Tracy Miller says, “I think we keep employees because they don’t have to make that decision—what to do with baby. I think a lot of people [thought that the infants would] be distracting. We haven’t found that to be so.” Employees also acknowledge that there have been minor necessary adjustments to their workday. “There are things you have to work around. If I want to meet with Lindsey, I have to make sure [the infant is] not eating or sleeping. But they’re easy fixes,” says Miller.<sup>1</sup>

Sixty percent of employees at NDDH are women. The comprehensive healthy maternity policies ensure that women are able to return to work quickly without concern for childcare or nursing. Furthermore,



## Worksite Wellness Initiatives in State Health Agencies: North Dakota

the policies uphold the family-friendly philosophy that is infused throughout NDDH. Continuous review has been used with each participating employee to evaluate the effectiveness of the infants in the worksite policies. The [infant at work request form](#) captures general information, including contact information, start and end dates of the infant at work period, and expected days and times an infant will be at the workplace. The initial request also collects specific information regarding the infant's location in the workplace and other pertinent information or requirements. Each employee is also required to complete the [infant at work review form](#) when their infant is six months old and enters other child care arrangements. The form captures the actual days and hours an infant was at work, any special accommodations that were requested, and comments regarding employee performance and productivity. In addition, the review forms document problems involved in having an infant at work and possible solutions, positive programmatic aspects, and necessary supervisory actions. Supervisors can also make recommendations for changes in the policy. Although formal reports of policy effectiveness are not currently available, NDDH has observed an overall positive response to these healthy maternity policies.

### **Lessons Learned:**

Identifying a lactation space has proved to be a challenge at times. Like most small state health agencies, NDDH rents its building space which it shares with other state agencies. On the negative side, when space was limited, facility management would relocate the nursing mothers to space that was not ideal. With the advent of the support for ACA, NDDH has had the ability to create a mother's room for the entire state campus and guests. States should include well-planned lactation spaces in their healthy maternity policies.

Another lesson NDDH learned from implementing its healthy maternity policies is that there needs to be frequent and open communication between supervisors and employees during the infant at work period. Adequate communication and follow-ups are necessary for the program to be successful. Supervisors must be up front with their employees and understand that every workplace may not be suitable for infants. Open communication eases concerns and expedites solutions.

NDDH also concluded that fostering a family-friendly atmosphere was key to making its infant at work and lactation policies successful, and that promoting a family-friendly philosophy facilitates family health and wellness. The department strongly believes in setting an example for health and wellness through their programs and policies. Comprehensive healthy maternity workplace policies support the NDDH mission to improve health in North Dakota families. NDDH staff hope that the department's success with the infants at work policy will inspire other agencies and organizations to explore implementing similar approaches.

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<sup>1</sup> KFVR-TV. "Bringing Baby to Work." Available at [http://www.kfyrtv.com/News\\_Stories.asp?news=61676](http://www.kfyrtv.com/News_Stories.asp?news=61676). Accessed 5-17-2013.