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January 27, 2009

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Public Health Launches Lactation Promotion to
Increase Breastfeeding Rates, Decrease Childhood Obesity

SAN JOSE, CALIF. — In an effort to increase breastfeeding rates in Santa Clara County and decrease childhood obesity, the Public Health Department will begin the Lactation Promotion Collaboration Project to expand its current efforts. The project is being developed in response to FIRST 5 Santa Clara County’s Childhood Obesity Prevention Strategic Plan.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 15%-20% of childhood obesity cases could be prevented through breastfeeding. “This collaborative effort enables us to address obesity at the earliest stage of life,” said Supervisor Liz Kniss, President of the County of Santa Clara Board of Supervisors and Chair of the Board’s Health and Hospital Committee. “Our Public Health Department is the right place to launch this effort and, I call on all health care providers to support women breastfeeding beyond the hospital stay.”

Numerous studies and reports proclaim the health benefits of breastfeeding. Breastfeeding: the First Defense against Obesity, a policy brief of the California WIC Association and the U.C. Davis Human Lactation Center in March 2006, highlights breastfeeding as a proven disease prevention strategy—especially in the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity. Overweight prevention begins long before children even enter preschool; it starts the day they are born, making breastfeeding the first step in obesity prevention. A recent analysis, which included 61 studies and nearly 300,000 participants, showed that breastfeeding consistently reduced the risks for overweight and obesity.

“Both babies and mothers benefit from breastfeeding. Breast milk contains antibodies which protect infants from bacterial and viral infections,” said Jolene Smith, Executive Director for FIRST 5 Santa Clara County. “Breastfeeding also reduces the risk of overweight and obesity during childhood.”
The lactation project has four components, which include expansion of the WIC Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program; expansion and promotion of the Santa Clara County Breastfeeding Support Line; increased utilization of existing breastfeeding resources through healthcare provider promotion and community collaborative efforts; and increased training and support for worksite wellness and breastfeeding promotion by businesses.

“The Santa Clara County Public Health Department has been a leader in promoting breastfeeding for over ten years,” said Dolores Alvarado, Community Health Promotion Director for the Public Health Department. “This project will help us continue expanding our breastfeeding outreach and support efforts through programs such as WIC.”

Expanding the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Breastfeeding Peer Counselor Program includes adding the program to the services being provided at two new Valley Health Center sites in Gilroy and Sunnyvale. In addition, Public Health will provide breast feeding support services to women outside the WIC program. Also, a pilot project will be started so that peer counselors can provide services almost immediately after birth by visiting clients during their stay at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center (SCVMC). This extra service complements the work of SCVMC, allows for continuity of peer counseling services, and assures that clients are served in their primary language.

In the last couple of years, the WIC program has expanded breastfeeding support services through the USDA-funded Breastfeeding Peer Support Pilot Project. During this pilot project, improvements in both duration and initiation of breastfeeding have been accomplished. Prior to the initiation of the Santa Clara County WIC Peer Counseling Project, the rates of exclusive breastfeeding were 7%. Currently, rates have increased to 14.2%, which is more than twice the rate before the Breastfeeding Support Pilot Project.

The Breastfeeding Support Line’s days and hours will be extended. Promotion to SCVMC clinics, as well as with two additional WIC Programs in the county, Gardner Health Center and Indian Health Center, will also take place.

Additionally, a part-time Public Health Nutrition Associate will be added to provide breastfeeding education and support to WIC participants and other clients in the North County and South County areas. Education services will be provided through both individual and group health/nutrition sessions, be culturally competent, and support services will be provided to the Breastfeeding Peer Counselors at the Sunnyvale and Gilroy sites.

In this multi-year project, FIRST 5 Santa Clara County will provide approximately $479,000 through June 2011.