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Customer Service Notes for WIC

Respecting Differences

We know that among our participants, there is much diversity. Diversity is not just race and gender but also includes age, color, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability. The way we work with diverse participants has a direct connection to how they feel about the customer service they receive.

In some WIC offices, participants come in speaking many different languages. When communicating with participants for whom English is not their first language, remember to be patient. Also, do not use lots of WIC jargon that these participants will be unfamiliar with. One technique that may help is to speak a little slower and clearly pronounce your words. Do not speak louder, as this will not help.

Some participants may share with you examples of the ethnic food they cook. Even if you are familiar with the food and know it is not the healthiest, how you convey that message is critical. We have heard of WIC staff in this situation make the following remark, "No wonder your son is heavy given all that fried food you cook." While the WIC employee was probably correct in her assessment, a better, more tactful way of conveying the same message would be, "I'll bet that's very tasty. Be sure not to give your son too much of that though as we want him to have more vegetables and fruits."

Religion is another dimension of diversity or cultural competency. The clothes a participant wears may reflect their religion. For example, those who practice Hinduism may come to the WIC office wearing a sari. Sometimes employees don't realize they are making insensitive comments. For instance, we have heard of WIC staff who during a warm summer day commented to a participant wearing a sari, "It must be hot wearing that outfit in this weather."

Respecting differences also applies to your co-workers. Be sensitive to the differences among your other employees. If you are unsure as to whether a comment or joke you make might be offensive to a co-worker, err on the side of caution, and do not make the remark.

Also be mindful that your co-workers may differ in their political reviews. The old adage about avoiding conversations involving politics and religion is the workplace remains a good one. While we all have our opinions about different topics, in the office, sometimes they are better left unsaid.

Respecting all of your participants and co-workers will lead to a more positive, inclusive atmosphere!

Questions for Reflection:

1. Do you ever have an immediate negative reaction to a participant who struggles to understand you because English is not her first language?
2. Do you stop and think whether a joke you are considering telling might be offensive?
3. Do you respect the differences among your co-workers?

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