

Malnutrition in Oakland? WIC office fights it

By Dennis Coffman
staff writer

Ethiopia isn't the only place where children are malnourished. Oakland County, despite its affluent image, has its own pockets of poverty.

Nowhere is the contrast between the well-off and the poor more evident than the north end of Orchard Lake Road, where glitzy shopping malls, with trendy shops and upscale restaurants, disappear into urban blight, empty storefronts and down-and-outers walking the sidewalks in the Pontiac area.

A sign of the times, the old Pontiac Motors administrative offices now house the Oakland Department of Social Services.

One social agency operating in the office complex was created about seven years ago, not to aid the malnourished in Africa or Asia, but in Oakland County.

THE WIC program is a supplemental food plan for women, infants and children.



ART EMANUELE/staff photographer

Barbara Chess of West Bloomfield interviews a woman seeking help in nutritional planning at the Women's, Infants, Children Program (WIC) in Pontiac.

It was not designed to provide food for the poor; the food stamp program does that. Rather, WIC was designed to get low-income mothers and their children to eat the right kinds of food.

"It's a nutritional problem," said Debbie McKee, Oakland County director. "They have an inadequate diet. We watch for an abnormal weight gain or weight loss," she said.

The WIC Program, whose funds are allocated through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, could be on the Reagan Administration list of programs to be eliminated.

Recent deliberations between the Congress and the administration indicate domestic programs such as WIC might be a trade-off for not cutting Social Security payments.

RECENT STUDIES have shown that nearly everything a pregnant mother ingests can affect the health of her baby. But according to McKee, the most common dietary deficiency is iron.

Because of nutritional deficiencies among pregnant mothers and their newborns in Pontiac, Oakland County, which otherwise would have to be considered far below the national average in infant mortality — is close to the state and national average.

For 1983, the latest year available, Oakland County had an infant mortality rate of 9.3 per 1,000 births, compared to the national average of 10.9 and the state average of 11.8.

"But Pontiac far exceeds the rest of the county," said Betty Yancy, the infant information coordinator in the Nursing Division of the Oakland County Health Department.

"That year, there were 124 infant deaths in Pontiac," she said. "The infant mortality rate for Pontiac was 19.3."

The WIC Program has a caseload of 8,200. "But that's only half of the number of people that ought to be receiving our services," said McKee.

TO REDUCE the mortality rate, WIC provides both food for thought and for the stomach.

It provides clients with food vouchers worth \$30 a month that can be used to buy specific kinds of foods.

"These foods are supplemental," said McKee. "They do not provide everything that is needed in the diet. They include things such as cheese, eggs, milk, peanut butter; for infants, an iron-fortified formula."

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The nutritional food is combined with an educational program to prevent low-weight births of babies who, if they do not die shortly after birth, suffer from abnormal growth and development.

According to WIC, a low-birthweight baby is 20 times more likely to die as a normal birthweight infant. Low-birthweight babies are also more likely to suffer physical and mental retardation and other developmental disabilities.

IF A PREGNANT woman is found to be nutritionally deficient, or if her child is deficient up to five years old, she is allowed to enter the WIC Program.

The mother can qualify regardless of whether she is breast- or bottle-feeding her baby.

"The mother is counseled by a dietitian, and she or the infant are re-evaluated every six months," said McKee. "We determine what their eating patterns are and counsel them until the mother and child are no longer at risk."

ELIGIBILITY for the program is based on a diagnosed deficiency and an income that is 185 percent of the poverty level — guidelines that include a large number of Pontiac residents.

"Pregnancy is a very stressful period," said McKee, and being young and poor add to the stress.

"A 16-year-old who is pregnant may not even be fully developed herself," she said. The age of the average WIC client is 20-25, but the service has been provided for mothers as young as 14.

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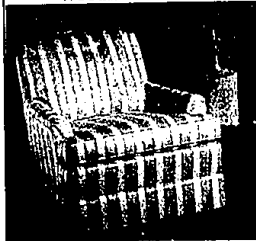
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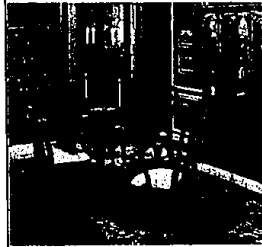
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