



Briefing Note

Date: December 20, 2022

Subject/Issue: Some BFI Ontario members have been inquiring about a document sent to Ontario public health units from Public Health Ontario titled, “Q & A consideration for re-designating as Baby-Friendly”.¹ The document has sparked confusion about the importance of Baby-Friendly Initiative (BFI) designation and the processes that are in place to ensure that a BFI designated facility maintains the BFI standards after becoming BFI designated.

Background

- The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care developed *Accountability Agreements for 2011-2013* which included BFI designation status as one indicator to measure public health unit performance for both the *Reproductive and Child Health Standards* of the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS). BFI designation status remained an Accountability indicator for 2014-2016.
- In 2017 the inclusion of BFI designation in the accountability agreements was extensively discussed. A decision was made that implementation of the Canadian BFI standards and BFI designation no longer be a requirement of the Ontario Public Health Standards.
- Many public health units became BFI designated when BFI designation was an indicator in the Accountability Agreements. In 2011 there were 7 public health units in Ontario that had achieved BFI designation. By 2018, 26 had achieved BFI designation and 6 of those had been re-designated.

Comments

- BFI Ontario was not consulted when the Public Health Ontario document was written or advised of its release.
- The WHO UNICEF document titled, *Implementation Guidance: protecting, promoting and supporting Breastfeeding in facilities providing maternity and newborn services: the revised BABY-FRIENDLY HOSPITAL INITIATIVE* (2018), provides an update of the BFI Standards based on current research and global public health policy. On page 6 the document states, “**The guidance focuses on integrating the programme more fully in the health-care system, to ensure that all facilities in a country implement the Ten Steps....using external assessment to regularly evaluate adherence to the Ten Steps.**”

The purpose was not to “incorporate evidence on potential and unexpected harms of BFHI designation implementation” as stated in the PHO Q & A document.²

- The WHO UNICEF Implementation Guidance document acknowledges “**In many countries, becoming designated has been a key motivating factor for facilities to transform their practices...The quality of care for breastfeeding clearly improved in facilities that were designated as “Baby-friendly”.**”³ The intent of the document was not to discourage BFI designation.
- Internationally, facilities have experienced challenges sustaining the policy and practice changes made when achieving BFI designation, especially when no regular monitoring systems are in place. Unlike many other countries, Canada requires BFI designated facilities to provide self-monitoring reports annually and a comprehensive report on each of the *Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding* every two years. Facilities must also undergo External Assessment by a team of BFI assessors every 5 years to determine if they are meeting the Canadian BFI Standards.⁴
- Accreditation is valued in Ontario as evidenced by the accreditation of long-term care facilities, hospitals, and even veterinary facilities. External evaluation provides feedback to a facility regarding strengths and areas for improvement and the facility can then take action to improve practices, reduce adverse effects and facilitate improved health outcomes. Accreditation also provides public transparency and improves staff and client satisfaction.
- The Baby-Friendly Initiative was recognized in 2022 as a leading practice by Health Standards Organization Accreditation Canada. This was described in the November 2022 newsletter in an article titled “Scaling Up the Baby-Friendly initiative Across Canada”.⁵
- Breastfeeding initiation rates in Ontario are 92% but there is a significant drop in exclusive breastfeeding to 65% at the time of hospital discharge. At 6 months of age only 36% of babies are exclusively breastfed which is significantly lower than the global target of 50% by 2025 and 70% by 2030.⁶ Hospitals and public health units need to work together to help mothers/birthing parents and families achieve their breastfeeding goals.
- A recent study explored the costs of suboptimal breastfeeding rates to the Ontario healthcare system and the healthcare savings if exclusive breastfeeding rates were increased. About 73 million dollars US would be saved if Ontario improved the exclusive breastfeeding rate at 6 months to 65%.⁷

Recommendations

- Ontario Public Health units are encouraged to implement the Canadian BFI Standards and become BFI designated. Support is available from BFI Ontario.
- First hand review of the WHO UNICEF [Implementation Guidance](#) document will assist public health units in forming their own perspective on the content.
- Canadian requirements following BFI designation are available on the Breastfeeding Committee for Canada’s website in a document titled, [Baby-Friendly Initiative Assessment Process and Costs for Hospitals, Birthing Centres and Community Health](#)

[Services](#). Review the national document for details of the monitoring of BFI designated facilities and the Breastfeeding Committee for Canada's commitment to accountability.

- Advocate for Public Health Ontario to update their communications to Public Health Units in Ontario regarding the value of BFI designation and redesignation.

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References

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2. World Health Organization, UNICEF. Implementation guidance: protecting, promoting and supporting breastfeeding in facilities providing maternity and newborn services – the revised Baby-Friendly Initiative. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2018; 6.
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5. Health Standards Organization Accreditation Canada. Ottawa, Ontario; 2022. Available from [Scaling-up the Implementation of the Baby-Friendly Initiative \(BFI\) Across Canada – Sharing our Success Stories! - HSO Health Standards Organization](#)
6. Better Outcomes Registry & Network Ontario (BORN Ontario). Born Ontario 2016-2018 Biennial Report. Ottawa, Ontario; 34. Available from <https://www.bornontario.ca/en/publications/resources/Documents/BORN-Biennial-Report-2016-18.pdf>
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