Abstract

Breastmilk is considered by health promotion organizations to be the most healthful and biologically appropriate food for human infants. Breastfeeding duration in Alaska’s North Slope Borough, the northernmost settlement in the United States, appears to fall far short of national guidelines. Health conditions such as diabetes, chronic and acute respiratory infection and otitis media are common among North Slope Borough residents; increased breastfeeding duration and exclusivity are correlated with reduced incidence of these and other illnesses. Research on breastfeeding in the region is scant; a quantitative study published in 2000 reflected declining breastfeeding durations, but no research on the topic has been conducted since that study. This research utilized focus group discussions with healthcare providers, WIC staff and members of the community in Utqiagvik, Alaska, to understand why breastfeeding rates appear to decline by 50% in the first eight weeks postpartum. Focus group participants identified aspects of policy, organizational, community and interpersonal life in the North Slope Borough that acted as barriers and as facilitators to breastfeeding. The insights shared by focus group participants could inform the development of effective breastfeeding support mechanisms in the region to improve breastfeeding and overall health outcomes.