

The Columbus Dispatch

Community Partnerships Critical to Solving Columbus's Infant Death Problem



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The Problem

In 2014, a Columbus City Council task force led by now-Mayor Andrew Ginther published a report that caused great concern and made all of us who work for better health in central Ohio take notice.

The report sought to uncover the causes of Columbus's high infant mortality rate, the number of babies who die before their first birthday. It's a statistic that masks a profoundly sad and often preventable tragedy. The task force identified a disconnected mix of social and health services in the community and dramatic disparities in infant death rates based on neighborhood and race. While our health systems continue to work diligently to address the medical issues surrounding infant mortality, this problem cannot be solved with medical care alone.

Joining Forces to Act

Shortly after the report was released, the City of Columbus announced the CelebrateOne initiative, which brought together public and private organizations from across the city to focus current efforts, and develop new ones where needed. Our health systems – Mount Carmel

Health System, Nationwide Children's Hospital, OhioHealth, and The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center – align in this work under the Central Ohio Hospital Council and the Ohio Better Birth Outcomes (OBBO) quality improvement collaborative. COHC and OBBO collaborate with CelebrateOne on numerous projects. We, our staff, and the teams at Columbus Public Health, Franklin County Public Health and the community's Federally Qualified Health Centers are committed to making it easier for birth parents to find the care they need for themselves and their children at every stage of their lives.

These efforts reduced the infant mortality rate in Franklin County for four consecutive years between 2017 to 2020. Unfortunately, rates began increasing in 2021 and 2022 and have been comparable to those early in the journey to address high infant mortality rates. Overall, 137 babies died in Franklin County before their first birthday in 2022. Notably, the death rate for Black infants continues to be 2½ times higher than it is for White babies.

Prematurity and preventable sleep-related deaths are leading causes of infant death in America and in central Ohio. Many causes of premature birth, such as diabetes or high blood pressure in the birth parent, can be avoided if identified and managed by a healthcare professional during pregnancy -- the earlier the better. Sleep-related deaths, especially in homes where one or more people are smokers, are among the most preventable cause of infant mortality. Our hospital systems continue to work together to educate parents and provide them with resources to ensure their baby's home sleep environment is safe.

Social Factors Affect Health

We live in a community where many people do not have the resources to cover basic needs of adequate food, clothing and shelter. This is the reality for many pregnant people who live in Columbus's highest infant mortality neighborhoods, and they often don't know that there are people and resources to help.

This situation illustrates many "social determinants of health" in our community. These factors include low high school graduation rates, unemployment, unsafe housing, food insecurity, homelessness and the lack of health insurance and transportation. While devastating on their own, they also negatively affect a pregnant person's health and the health of their baby. The more of these factors present in a group, the worse that group's health is likely to be, along with the complications that come with it, such as diabetes, heart disease, and infant deaths. Additionally, racism as a public health issue and its potential ties to these adverse outcomes is something that we and our community need to acknowledge and address throughout our health care landscape.

CelebrateOne and other community partners are now training and hiring a new type of care giver called "community health worker," to connect people in Columbus's highest risk neighborhoods to the services they need. They also train volunteers to be Safe Sleep Ambassadors for new parents.

Our hospital systems are addressing these social determinants in new ways, too: by locating more parent and infant services in and near high-risk neighborhoods, and by collaborating with the providers and agencies there to help parents get the care and education they need. Our prenatal clinics connect pregnant people to Legal Aid if they need help resolving housing, child support or bankruptcy issues. We connect parents to tobacco cessation and substance use services if they have addiction challenges. Our hospitals also fund Step One for a Healthy Pregnancy, a hotline birth parents can use if they're recently pregnant and need help finding a health care provider early in their pregnancy. Contact StepOne at (614) 721-0009 or online at www.pcchealth.org/stepone.

We also ask more questions while new parents and babies are in our hospitals and clinics to ensure that they're returning to a safe and stable home. We connect them to visiting nurses and doulas who assist with beginning breastfeeding and making sure parents and babies have what they need to thrive. Virtually every new parent in our hospitals also watches a helpful CelebrateOne video, which offers tips on safe sleep, reducing baby's exposure to tobacco smoke, and the benefits of breastfeeding.

More Action is Needed

Certainly, these measures have saved lives, but our community statistics show they're still not enough, especially for Black parents and babies, and in Columbus's underserved neighborhoods. The birth of a baby is a joyous occasion and cause for celebration, but whether or not that baby is born without complications and survives its first year of life depends on a host of factors over time, from the health of the birth parent before pregnancy to the safe sleep practices of all who care for the baby.

CelebrateOne and its partners, including our hospitals, are putting renewed and intense emphasis on the needs of Black parents and babies, and will continue to do so until measurable and long-lasting improvements are made in their lives, and in their health and birth outcomes.

Each of us, as individual citizens, too, must offer as much attention and compassion as we can to pregnant people, new parents and their needs. Anyone who is a parent or has watched a family member, friend or co-worker navigate the first year of caring for a new child knows how difficult this time can be. Assume they need help. Help them get to their doctor's appointments and encourage them to be honest with their caregivers if they have concerns about their own health or baby's. Remind them that, while most of the attention may be on baby this first year, they need to care for themselves as well.

Beyond your own circle of family, friends and acquaintances, there are many vulnerable parents, babies and families in our community who need help. To make Columbus the kind of city we can all be proud of, we must eliminate every barrier we can that keeps the most vulnerable among us from living a healthy life. Ensuring that our infants are born healthy and have what they need to flourish in their first year is a good place to start.