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Opinion Column

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You can help cut the number of infant deaths

The infant mortality rate, which measures the number of deaths of children under one year of age, is an important marker of the overall health of a community. It paints a picture about general living conditions, social well-being, rates of illness, quality and access to medical care, public health practices and quality of the environment. In Franklin County, more than 120 babies died before the age of one in 2022.

In 2021, the infant mortality rate in Franklin County was 8.1 deaths per 1,000 live births compared to 5.4 in the United States that same year. In 2020, the US ranked 32nd out of 37th in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries. When taking a look at infant mortality by race, Black babies are more than two times more likely to die than white babies.

There are many factors that can cause a baby to die, including prematurity - the top cause of infant death in Franklin County (20% of infant deaths in 2022), congenital anomalies (15%), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (13%) and infections (15%).

Collaboration is the key.

CelebrateOne is a collective impact organization, existing to bring our community together to fight to ensure that every baby thrives to age one and beyond. Our role is to help our community take what works and apply it consistently, in a coordinated fashion for every birthing family and for every baby.

The most disconcerting part about infant death is that many deaths are preventable. Because sleep related deaths can make up between 12-21% of infant deaths in a given year, CelebrateOne continues to educate the community about infant safe-sleep practices, better known as the ABCs of safe sleep: ALONE, on the baby's BACK and in an empty CRIB.

What else can be done to reduce infant mortality?

We understand that social causes, termed social determinants of health, have profound implications on birth outcomes. Economic stability, high quality education, consistent access to healthcare, neighborhood safety and investment and level of exposure to implicit or explicit racial biases can mean the difference between life and death for Columbus' youngest residents. Because of this, CelebrateOne is making sure families know when they are pregnant sooner and are connected to services immediately.

What is CelebrateOne doing?

In partnership with Columbus Metropolitan Library, CelebrateOne provides free pregnancy tests at the main library and 16 branches. To receive one, simply see a library staff member and request a kit - no questions asked and no information will be required. Each test kit contains information on what to do in the case of a positive test. In collaboration with Physicians Care Connection, CelebrateOne hosts StepOne, which is the city's front door to accessing prenatal care. Newly pregnant people can call a single phone number and be connected with prenatal care across the city.

Another way that CelebrateOne addresses social determinants of health is through expanding access to community health workers. A community health worker provides individualized and culturally responsive support to families. CelebrateOne employs a team of community health workers and also makes referrals to partners across the community who employ community health workers.

The impact on Black parents

Racism is a primary driver of racial disparities in infant mortality. This is attributed to implicit and explicit biases and racism-related stress experienced by Black birthing parents. In 2021, CelebrateOne convened a group of 31 Black women who shared the barriers they encountered during their pregnancies and/or postpartum. These listening sessions provided insights into the ways bias and discrimination can impact mental health, clinical care and, ultimately, infant and maternal health outcomes, despite socioeconomic status.

This and other peer reviewed studies recommended ensuring that Black birthing parents had access to doula services. Doulas help expectant parents prepare for, deliver and recover from childbirth. A doula is a birthing advocate, and will ensure the birthing person is safe, empowered, informed and respected throughout their pregnancy and postpartum experience. CelebrateOne expands access to doula services through facilitating a professional doula training program.

What can you do to help reduce infant mortality?

As we wind down Infant Mortality Awareness Month, ask yourself 'What can I do to make the lives of birthing families safer?' We have some ideas: Take a safe sleep ambassador training class through Columbus Public Health or direct a family to StepOne to get access to prenatal care. The most important thing anyone can do is listen to families. Let us all listen intently when they share their experiences. And then, it's up to us to take action, because when we do more babies in Franklin County will be celebrating their first birthdays.