

Keeping Chester Moms Healthy



Shiann Smith, 7, left, and Princejai, 4, left, get ready to pose in the photobooth with parents, Shinice White and Shawn Smith at the family reunion for beneficiaries of family programs by the Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation. RICK KAUFFMAN – DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

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RICK KAUFFMAN – DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA Traminee Hobson, right, with husband, Rashad Hobson, center, and daughter Zoey, left, benefitted from the services provided by the Nurse-Family Partnership.

CHESTER >> For many parents and expecting mothers, childbirth adds a dynamic responsibility to the challenges that many face in the city of Chester.

For 25 years, the Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation has aimed to ease the challenges for low-income and minority individuals who lack the resources and support to create a thriving family united.

The goal, as spelled out by founder and current Vice President of Programs for the Community Foundation Joanne Craig, was to reduce the instances of infant mortality in Chester, which she said in 1992 was “off the Richter scale.”

“Chester had a rate equivalent or greater than a third-world country,” Craig said about the 22 per 1,000 infant deaths the city was experiencing in the early ‘90’s. “Cuba was doing better than we were at the time.”

Twenty-five years later, Craig said the number in Chester is still high – the average is around six infant deaths per 1,000 – and didn’t want to take credit for the drop to the present rate of 15 infant deaths per 1,000, but said the Community Foundation was making strides in promoting public health for residents.

“We have well-qualified, trained staff, case managers and nurses that go into the homes and they work with families, provide care coordination, case management and home visiting, health education, and they make sure the families are connected to health care,” Craig said. “We help connect them to resources.”

A variety of programs that work under the umbrella of CKCF help coordinate soon-to-be mothers and families with an aid network that eases the weight of both planned and unplanned pregnancy. Healthy Start is a 20-year-old program that helps people in the city of Chester. Nurse-Family Partnership serves the whole county.

Both require aid packages from state and federal grants, which are highly competitive. CKCF must compete against 300 similar communities around the United States. Only about a third receive the necessary funding.

However, for a quarter century, the aid offered to the Chester community has bolstered the lives of hundreds of families every year.

Octavia Burton, 36 weeks pregnant with her second child, said that during her first pregnancy the aid offered from Healthy Start gave her a much needed “sense of security.”

Her son Tejon, 5, was born with a kidney condition that affects him to this day. She said the help of her case worker, Ursula, gave her both the support she needed as well as the knowledge to be a more caring mother.

“I was always on edge, I had stillborns before, and once you lose a child you’re on edge all the time,” said Burton, 30. “They gave me the ability to work around my schedule and still be able to check up on my son.”

Whether it’s counselling, rides to the doctor’s office, a complimentary car seat or crib, pro bono law services to deal with housing and deadbeat landlords, the services go beyond a medical checkup.

“They gave me all the information that I needed, it was really wonderful,” said Tramaine Hobson, 36, who after going through the network with her daughter, Zoey, joined the staff at Nurse-Family Partnership as clerical support.

“It really helped us and prepared us to be a parent,” said husband, Rashad Hobson, 35. “They were able to help my wife and encouraged her to get the care she needed.”

“It’s difficult to travel around and get to and from a doctor when you don’t have a car,” said mother Shinice White, 44, whose two children, Shiann, 7, and Princejai, 4, benefitted from the programs.

“Healthy Start had a program where they picked you up and brought you to a doctor’s appointments, WIC appointments,” she said.

When asked what conditions she would have been in without the benefit of Healthy Start, White said, “very stressed and very much behind the eight ball.”

For those in Chester suffering deplorable living conditions at the hands of absent or derelict landlords, the CKCF offers legal aid for participants to have an attorney defend them in pursuing low-income housing vouchers, food stamps or a variety of public health necessities for poor families.

Jordan Casey, 33, a staff attorney with the Health and Education Assistance Project that works with CKCF and the Widener University Delaware School of Law, said he represents mothers living in deplorable conditions in Chester.

“The walls were literally black with mold, exposed wiring, and the landlord had essentially abandoned the property,” Casey said, adding that the mother attempted to go to an emergency shelter, but was turned away due to the fact that she wasn’t necessarily “homeless.”

“She had given her kids away to the children’s father,” Craig said. “But, we were able to go in an advocate for her and we were able to get her into emergency shelter and she is now on the track to transitional housing.”

Ultimately, Craig said the goal of the foundation was to no longer exist, to no longer be a necessity for families in Delaware County.

“It’s not just about the pregnancy, it’s about life,” Craig said. “It’s about making them self-sufficient so that they don’t need this program again, which will leave the program open to someone else.”