

Delco's infant mortality soars above state average, study finds



The Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation thrives on the group efforts of a number of agencies concerned with the public health of individuals in Delaware County. RICK KAUFFMAN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

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CHESTER >> Babies are dying at an alarming rate in Chester and Upper Darby.

A lack of resources, low income, gaps in health coverage, unsafe neighborhoods, racial inequality, limited access to healthy foods are among the issues that many women and families face in Delaware County.

And those are precisely the issues that the Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation and its partnerships with Healthy Start, the Nurse-Family Partnership and WIC (Women, Infants and Children) aim to reduce in bringing the infant mortality rate below the national average.

Those partnerships, along with services provided from attorneys who represent women and families in need, must meet the challenges facing the underrepresented in order to improve the most critical of health issues facing infants: Low birth weight.

“It’s the main cause of death,” said Gabrielle Grode, the evaluation specialist at Public Health Management Corp.

As of 2013, there were 10.2 infant deaths per 1000 children in Delaware County, significantly higher than the state average of 6.7 and the national average of 6.0 deaths per 1000.

However, the greatest disparity occurring between races: Black mothers are more than three times more likely to lose a child than a white mother in Delaware County.

All told, if the rates of infant mortality with black mothers were equal to that of white mothers, 2,765 babies between 2009 and 2013 would have survived.

Chester and Upper Darby accounted for 38 percent of all instances of infant and fetal death in Delaware County, while representing only 28 percent of the births.

Haverford, meanwhile, has 9 percent of the births and only 3.5 percent of the deaths by comparison.

“The diversity of the county is a tremendous challenge, I think that it’s very easy to live in Radnor and never visit Chester or not recognize that Upper Darby is part of the same community,” said Frances Sheehan, the president of Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation. “The diversity is definitely a challenge, but it’s also a very generous county, I think people in even the most struggling communities want to give back whether it’s financial resources or volunteering.”

Baby’s 1st Project, a prenatal periods of risk study, was initiated by the CKCF with intent to close the infant mortality and racial gap in order to help babies reach their first birthday.

Laying out the risk factors between physical and mental health, spacing between births, prenatal care, housing and a lack of education, staff can identify the triggers that lead to higher rates of infant death and offer care programs accordingly.

“We promise to help the staff address social determinants of health negatively impacting their clients,” said attorney Dan Atkins, who leads the Medical-Legal Partnership with Healthy Start. “Imagine if they were able to deal with clients who didn’t have their utilities shut off, or looming evictions or health insurance concerns, or SNAP benefits or Welfare assistance, imagine if those issues were taken off the table.”

Thanks in large part to Joanne Craig, who started the Women’s & Children’s Health Programs to battle infant mortality, the partnerships she’s fostered under one umbrella are able protect and support mothers amidst the most trying times.

“We had to have great collaborators in health care,” Craig said.

Expectant mothers in Delaware County who are dealing with risk factors that can lead to health issues with their baby are encouraged to reach out to the Crozer-Keystone Community Foundation, which is a separate entity from the for-profit Crozer-Keystone Health System.

Information can be found at ckcommunityfoundation.org/past-events.

Further programming for the foundations 25 anniversary continue this week on Thursday at the Widener University Webb Room where folks can learn more about the Medical-Legal Partnership Training, and on Friday at the Ballrooms at Boothwyn for a grand finale celebration.