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Group: Study infant mortality

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HUTCHINSON - Kansas ranks 29th among other states in the nation for infant mortality, and is one of 13 states that doesn't collect information about the underlying causes.

Both are statistics the group Kansas Action for Children - a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that focuses on improving the lives of children and their families - would like to see changed.

Their first push is to enact legislation that would allow health workers to interview the mother of a deceased infant in order to better understand the causes behind infant mortality.

"Kansas ranks higher than neighboring states and the nation, said Stephanie Mullholland, communications director for Kansas Action for Children.

Under the legislation, health workers would be able to interview the mother of an infant who has died, in order to gather information to help reduce the infant mortality rate. The proposal was amended into House Bill 2454 on Tuesday and will be addressed in a conference committee when the Legislature reconvenes April 26, said Ryan Wright, KAC director of development.

Mullholland said some of the questions health workers would ask would include: Did the mother have access to prenatal care? If she didn't, was it because she didn't have health insurance? Did she have transportation to see a doctor?

"Thirty-seven other states are already collecting this kind of data," Mullholland said.

Officials could identify trends from the additional data, which, in turn, could offer insight to what additional steps local agencies can take to prevent infant deaths, she said.

There were 303 deaths of children under 12 months old in 2008 in Kansas, and 1,510 infant deaths between 2004 and 2008 in the state, according to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

The state's infant mortality rate is 7.4 based on that five-year period, meaning there were 7.4 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. The national infant death rate average is 6.7, Mullholland said, and Iowa, for example, has an infant mortality rate of 5.1.

In Reno County, the rate is 6.9, with 29 infant deaths recorded between 2004 and 2008, according to KDHE.

Undetermined deaths among children are most likely to occur among infants, according to statistics from the Kansas State Child Death Review Board, which meets monthly and examines the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Kansas children under 18 years old.

Fourteen of the 18 undetermined deaths in 2007 were of children 1-year-old and younger, according to the most recent statistics available from the state child death review board. Some cases revealed "incomplete investigations or law enforcement agencies not being informed of the death," the board reported.

KAC is pursuing the legislation in the hope that health workers would be allowed to gather critical data after any infant death, as a way to fill in the information gaps left behind in traditional investigations.

"In some instances, autopsies were not performed or were incomplete, or toxicology reports on the victim were not requested," the child death review board reported.

"We want to address what's going on at the local level and what the specific causes (of infant deaths) might be," Mullholland said.

Additionally, if legislation is passed and the state could gather the additional information on infant mortality, Kansas would become eligible for federal funding through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mullholland said. The federal funding could cover the costs of the interviews and data collection, she said.

The legislation also would require health workers to inform anyone they want to interview that participation is voluntary. If the mother is under 18 years old, workers would have to get consent from a parent or guardian.

"What we've found is when a family loses a child, they're always very interested in helping to make sure that doesn't happen

to other families," Mullholland said.

Jan Bretz-Hughes, who coordinates a Hutchinson support group called Compassionate Friends, agreed.

"I think couples would be glad to talk about it," she said. "A couple is needing to talk about it, and after a few weeks, a mother's friends don't want to talk about it anymore.

"It might uncover more data as to how poverty affects (infant mortality) or any mitigating circumstances."

Bretz-Hughes, whose 16-year-old daughter died in a car crash, has been offering the Compassionate Friends support group for nearly 15 years. Couples who have lost an infant or had a stillborn infant meet the third Monday of every month in the library of Holy Cross Catholic School in Hutchinson.

"I think families who have lost a child are very eager to make something good come from that death," she said. "Even if it's an interview or someone gathering information, most families I think would see that as a helpful thing that could come from their child's death."

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