

Wisconsin county sees 70 percent drop in infant mortality

News:
By Joe Johnson/Associated Press

The rate of African American infant mortality has dropped 70 percent in Dane County in a recent five-year period and state officials hope to expand the efforts in Wisconsin.

Minnesota's next-door neighbor has the nation's highest African American infant mortality rate, which is the rate at which babies die before their first birthdays.

In Dane County, health officials said the drop is due to more prenatal care, increased community support and fewer African American children being born prematurely.

At a meeting in Madison, doctors and nurses discussed the state's efforts to curb infant mortality and learned about Dane County's success.

The county's African American infant mortality rate had been about 19 deaths per 1,000 births until 2001. Then following up on suspicions that it was dropping, the health department found that the rate fell to about two deaths per 1,000 births in 2004 to 2006.

Dr. Thomas Schlenker, director of the Madison-Dane County Health Department, said health department workers initially thought the drop might be a blip or a mistake because relatively few African American babies are born in the county and the racial gap had gone on for so long.

He said they confirmed that there was no decline in African American births, which would affect the trend.



Model pictured.

In fact, those births grew to about 450 a year. About 4.4 percent of Dane County's population is African American.

They then expanded the time period to make the statistics stronger and determined that the rate was six deaths per 1,000 births from 2002 to 2006. That would mean a drop of nearly 70 percent from previous years.

The state's African American infant mortality rate is more than 17 deaths per 1,000 births, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Southeast Wisconsin boasts even higher rates.

Nationally, the infant mortality rate is about seven deaths per 1,000 births. For African Americans, it's 13 deaths per 1,000 births.

Karen Timberlake, secretary of the state Department of Health and Family Services, said infant mortality is a top priority.

Schlenker said Dane County's improvement meant that 29 lives were saved from 2002 to 2006 and \$5 million in savings on treatment of premature babies.

The county didn't make a special effort to address the problem, he said, but several long-standing programs continued.

Others at the meeting said churches and other networking groups were helping women find prenatal care.

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Carola Gaines, a member of the Madison-area's African American Health Network, said her group plans to form focus groups of young mothers to ask them what they think is being done right.

The city-county health department has applied for a grant from the UW School of Medicine and Public Health to study the trend and compare it to Racine County, which has about the same number of births but has a African American infant mortality rate four times higher.

Sabrina Gilliam, 21, of Madison, who has a four-month old daughter, said she got help from a nurse at a city-county health department. She learned she was pregnant as she was about to start college and had no place to live.

Gilliam said the nurse told her about breast-feeding classes, how to improve her diet and even arranged for paid cab rides for doctor visits. The nurse also directed her to a home for pregnant women and new mothers, she said.

"I don't know what I would have done

with her," said Gilliam, who is now planning to enroll in college in Madison.

Because of its success with infant mortality rates, a \$500,000 grant will fund a study of how Dane County has cut the mortality rate for African American babies and how the success could be repeated elsewhere.

Plans also call for studying nearby Racine, where the infant mortality rate is four times higher, and other areas.

University of Wisconsin-Madison medical researchers and the Madison-Dane County Health Department will do the analysis.

The grant is from the Wisconsin Partnership Program created with money paid to the state when Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Wisconsin became for-profit.

Infant mortality rates are kept for various nations around the world and are considered quality-of-life indicators. The definitions may vary by nation. The United States reports every case of infant mortality, it has been suggested that some other developed countries do not.

The United States counts all births as live if they show any sign of life, regardless of prematurity or size. This includes what many other countries report as stillbirths. In Austria and Germany, fetal weight must be at least 500 grams (1 pound) to count as a live birth.

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