

North Carolina's Infant Mortality Rate Lowest In Recorded History: Marked Improvement Among African American Births

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RALEIGH — North Carolina's infant mortality rate declined sharply in 2010, reaching its lowest level in state history. The rate, seven infant deaths for every 1,000 live births, represents an 11.4 percent drop from the state's 2009 rate of 7.9 deaths.

The largest decline in infant mortality in 2010 was among African American infants, a reduction of 19.6 percent from the previous year.

"These encouraging numbers underscore the results when we invest in education, including public health education," Gov. Perdue said. "The statistics also show the foresight of our steps to protect the most vulnerable in our society."

State Health Director Jeff Engel noted that many factors, including public health programs that focus on providing accessible, high quality medical care and promoting healthy lifestyles for women of childbearing age contributed to the improvement.

"Last year, 900 pregnant minority women received services through our Healthy Beginnings program without the loss of a single infant," Dr. Engel said. "This progress is a direct result of long-term, sustained investments in promising programs to reduce infant deaths and eliminate disparities in birth outcomes."

North Carolina's Healthy Beginnings program is a notable initiative contributing to the state's progress. The program supports 12 communities working to improve birth outcomes in minority families, with an emphasis on breastfeeding, consumption of multivitamins with folic acid, infant safe sleep practices, women's healthy weight, reproductive life planning and elimination of tobacco use.

The state also has four federally funded Healthy Start projects (Baby Love Plus and Healthy Start Corps) in 15 counties that focus on improving birth outcomes primarily within African American and American Indian communities. This long-term investment has resulted in the vast majority of those counties showing an improvement in 2010 in birth outcomes among minority families.

Of significance, this year's report noted a 46 percent reduction in reported cases of SIDS - down from 98 deaths in 2009 to 53 in 2010. Sustained efforts to promote infant safe sleep practices, funded since 2007 with four one-time appropriations from the N.C. General Assembly, have allowed for expansion of the state's bilingual Infant Safe Sleep Campaign. The campaign emphasizes best practices such as: a safe sleep environment, breastfeeding, appropriate room temperature, back sleep positioning and elimination of tobacco smoke exposure. This effort has been coordinated by the North Carolina Healthy Start Foundation in partnership with other public and private entities such as local health and social service departments, childcare facilities and hospitals.

State and federal funds continue to support outreach and training for health care providers to promote folic acid consumption, healthy weight and reproductive life planning for young men and women through the N.C. Preconception Health Campaign. The North Carolina Healthy Start Foundation provides leadership in developing educational materials and increases public awareness of behaviors and resources that promote healthy families through the use of media, social media and electronic messaging. The evidence-based Nurse Family Partnership initiative, funded through a public-private partnership, promotes healthy births as well as improved child health. These and other ongoing collaborations are essential in order to continue to reduce infant deaths in North Carolina.

“We have set ambitious targets for improvement in all areas of public health,” Engel said, “but making North Carolina a healthier state starts with ensuring that babies are born healthy. While we should acknowledge the historic progress that has been made, the continued racial disparity in infant deaths demonstrates that our work is not yet finished.”

North Carolina continues to seek effective ways to reduce infant deaths and eliminate disparities in birth outcomes. In March 2011, the Division of Public Health, the Division of Medical Assistance (Medicaid) and Community Care of North Carolina jointly implemented a new program to improve the quality of maternity care for pregnant Medicaid recipients by providing them with a Pregnancy Medical Home. The model engages obstetrical providers as Pregnancy Medical Homes and local health departments as providers of Pregnancy Care Management Services.

The number of babies born to North Carolina residents in 2010 (122,302) dropped by 3.5 percent from 2009 (126,785).

To see a full copy of the report, visit <http://www.schs.state.nc.us/SCHS/deaths/ims/2010/>

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