

Battling Infant Mortality on the Frontlines

Erika Clark Jones, CelebrateOne

Infant mortality is a health crisis in Columbus. Every week in our community three babies die, and tragically, African American babies are dying at two and a half times the rate of white babies. Through [CelebrateOne](#), Columbus' local effort to combat infant mortality, we've looked to data and research that show several factors, including the neighborhood where we live, contribute to this problem.

Where people live, learn, work, and play affects their health and the health of their babies. In Columbus, we have [eight neighborhoods](#) where the infant mortality rate is up to four times higher than the national average. Babies born too small or too soon – one of the leading causes of infant mortality – are more likely to be found in these neighborhoods. These neighborhoods also have higher rates of poverty, unemployment, housing instability, uninsured people, and transportation barriers.

To address the health disparities in these neighborhoods, we've looked to the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) blueprint on improving [maternal and child health](#). We know that to move toward health equity, we must empower community members to be a part of our efforts and initiate and evaluate the effectiveness of place-based upstream interventions.

That's why CelebrateOne, where I serve as Director of Community Strategies, is working closely with public, private, nonprofit, and community partners to work toward our goal of reducing infant mortality by 40 percent and cutting racial disparities in half in Columbus by 2020. To accomplish these goals, we know we must address all risk factors that contribute to this problem including: premature births, low birth weight, sleep-related deaths, exposure to tobacco smoke, and the social determinants of health.

Since the launch of CelebrateOne in the fall of 2014, our outreach and education efforts have been concentrated in our neighborhoods that are most impacted by infant mortality and more likely to face other social and economic challenges. With the support of a \$1.7 million grant from the United Health Foundation, we've begun recruiting and training community health workers who live in these neighborhoods to connect moms, moms-to-be, and families to resources and support in their neighborhoods through community-based partner agencies.

We also are working closely with the Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services (FCJFS) to ensure more women of childbearing age are enrolled in health coverage. As a result of the expansion of Medicaid in Ohio and deliberate enhancement of efforts with FCJFS, we've seen a net increase of more than 19 percent in overall Medicaid enrollment among women of childbearing age in the county. And, we are also working with our four hospital systems and other medical partners to improve access to reproductive health planning and prenatal care systems for highest risk families.

Additionally, to achieve our goals, we must look further upstream to address these disparities by putting an emphasis on community informed, evidence and place-based interventions with measurable outcomes.

We are working with key partners to align community resources with community need through innovative programs. Working with the Columbus Department of Development, our community plans to invest in infrastructure and transit in our high-priority neighborhoods through expanded bus lines, improved sidewalks, and a smart payment system that will ensure residents get access to transportation regardless of income. These investments will help residents get to provider appointments and will improve their access to employment and educational opportunities throughout the city.

CelebrateOne is also pursuing a significant local program modification that would extend rental subsidies for homeless pregnant women beyond 3 months to 18 months. This change will help address economic barriers and housing instability for vulnerable moms-to-be. In partnership with the Kirwan Institute and United Way of Central Ohio, we have also secured a Community Cares grant to expand our community

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leadership academy. This academy expansion will equip more residents from more areas with skills to develop into better leaders in their communities and stronger advocates for their neighborhoods.

These examples highlight a few of our upstream initiatives launching in our neighborhoods that are aimed at improving the quality of life for all residents and addressing social determinants of health.

Moving the needle on infant mortality won't happen overnight. That's why we are laying the groundwork now for long term success by investing in our communities that need it most. Addressing these and other risk factors will continue to move us towards our goal of celebrating more first birthdays in Columbus, Ohio.

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