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State's infant death rates higher for blacks

BY ANDREA ROBINSON

A black mother in South Florida is almost three times as likely than a white mother to have her baby die before he or she turns a year old.

The Black Infant Health Practice Initiative wants to find out why.

Among the project's chief aims: to review community conditions and stress factors that contribute to higher incidences of still births or fetal and infant deaths. The initiative also wants to hear from local healthcare, political and community leaders, as well as conduct citizen focus groups about the challenges black babies face.

The project has a tight deadline. It's slated to run through June 30.

The \$1 million study was pushed by two Tampa area lawmakers. State Sen. Arthenia Joyner and Rep. Betty Reid were alarmed at the number of infant deaths in their communities -- as high as four times that of white babies.

"Every child deserves a long, healthy, productive life. This legislation will ensure that more of Florida's children have the same opportunity," Gov. Charlie Crist said when he signed the measure into law last July.

The eight participating counties in the study all have nonwhite infant mortality rates at least 1.75 times greater than the white rate. The counties, a mix of urban and rural, include Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach, Gadsen, Hillsborough, Putnam, Orange and Duval. Gadsen and Hillsborough have the highest black mortality rate -- four times that of white infants, according to Dr. Emile Commedore, a physician and director of the Florida Health Department's office of minority health.

The state wants to determine the medical and social factors that contribute to black infant mortality. "We want to develop community strategies to deal with this," Commedore said.

'COMMUNITY PROBLEM'

Experts say lowering the infant-death rate will require societal and cultural changes that are measured in decades, not years.

Advocates say some fetal and infant deaths are inevitable, but many of the deaths are preventable.

"We are 100 percent committed to do whatever it takes to save our babies, all of our babies," said Manny Fermín, chief executive officer of the Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade.

Those who work in the field say the problem is not new. Ultimately, advocates say, the deaths of black babies are not only a problem for the black community. They are an indicator of the entire community's priorities -- getting services to struggling families at the front end saves taxpayer money in the long run.

"It's a community problem. We may not be directly affected by the problem, but the moms don't have insurance. Our taxpayers' dollars pay for this," said Kalenthia Nunnley-Bain, president of the Healthy Start Coalition board in Miami-Dade.

RAISING AWARENESS

The Healthy Start Coalition of Miami-Dade and the Healthy Infants, Healthy Mothers Coalition of Broward County have started talks with local healthcare providers, child-care advocates and agencies that provide services to pregnant women and infants to find out how to improve services.

Those talks soon will reach the ground level, Fermín said.

"We're raising the consciousness level," Fermín said. ``We need people at the street level to become conscious of this."

Added Michelle Reese, project director with Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies in Broward: ``Some people just don't know this is happening."

PREVENTABLE DEATHS

The infant mortality rate is the number of babies who die before their first birthday for every 1,000 live births.

Data from the Florida Department of Health shows that the number of black babies dying before turning a year old increased from 10.7 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001 to 11.5 deaths in 2006. In Broward, the number of deaths rose slightly, from 11.01 in 2001 to 11.12 in 2006.

Between 2003 to March 2007, Broward County health officials examined fetal and infant deaths across the county in an attempt to lower deaths overall.

A November report found more than 40 percent of fetal and infant deaths in the county were preventable. "Reduction of preventable deaths due to infection, SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome), maternal medical causes, accidents and homicide would have the largest impact on overall perinatal mortality," the report states.

Advocates point to likely culprits such as lack of prenatal care, diet and obesity.

"People are not getting regular medical care, not getting proper nutrition. If the mom is overweight, she has other medical problems that will impact the baby," said Ellen Anderson, spokeswoman with Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies.

But there may be other factors indirectly related to healthcare. Among them, said Tamara Taitt of Miami-Dade's Healthy Start Coalition, are lack of family support, poor working conditions, low pay and lack of time off work for medical appointments.

"Even if you have a nearby clinic, but it takes four hours out of your day to be seen for a 10-minute appointment, you're not likely to go," Taitt said.