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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**HEALTHY START COALITION TO KICK-OFF INFANT MORTALITY AWARENESS
MONTH SEPTEMBER 1 AT THE AZALEA PROJECT**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. – Each year, we continue to lose the equivalent of eight classes of kindergarteners in Northeast Florida. Too many of our babies are dying before their first birthday because of preventable causes and lack of health services.

Help us give every baby a healthy start by spreading awareness of infant mortality, the death of a baby before he or she turns one. September is National Infant Mortality Awareness Month and the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition is kicking off the month with a press conference on September 1 at 10 am at the Azalea Project storefront location at 157 E. 8th St., Jacksonville, FL 32206. The Azalea Project serves substance-using women, a service that has become even more critical as the opioid epidemic grows, and recently received an expansion grant for prevention activities in all five Northeast Florida counties.

The event will include information on how to save our babies and stories from families who work hard to give their babies the best possible start in life. Moms, dads and babies will be on-site for interviews and photos.

Infant mortality has decreased by 35 percent since the Healthy Start program and community-based Healthy Start coalitions were created in 1991. But despite these achievements, 139 babies died in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and St. Johns counties in 2016. There were an additional 152 fetal deaths or stillbirths.

The regional rate of 7.4 deaths per 1000 live births is significantly higher compared to the state rate of 6.1 deaths and national rate of 5.8 deaths.

While conditions related to premature birth tend to be the leading cause of infant death, there are several preventable areas of concern:

- More than 700 babies were born in area hospitals with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome in 2016. The growing opioid crisis is resulting in drug-exposed babies, who are more likely to experience poor birth outcomes (including fetal and infant death) and often suffer lifelong complications.
- 1 in 5 deaths was a Sudden Unexpected Infant Death – most of which were sleep-related deaths. This is a growing percentage, and largely linked to unsafe sleep practices by parents, like bedsharing, placing their infants on their stomachs and putting babies to sleep with stuffed animals, pillows, blankets and other items.

Infant mortality is a sentinel indicator of health – when communities experience infant mortality, it is a reflection of the overall health of a population.

About the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition

The Healthy Start Coalition leads a cooperative community effort to reduce infant mortality and improve the health of children, childbearing women and their families in Northeast Florida. For more information, visit <http://nefhealthystart.org> or on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @nefhealthystart.

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