

Lauded for breastfeeding policies

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The state hospital and the school district received some of the highest marks in a recent survey of breastfeeding policies among the county's largest employers by the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition.

"Breastfeeding initiation and duration is an important contributor to reducing infant mortality. Having a proper workplace breastfeeding policy helps improve breastfeeding duration for working moms," said Jennifer Gornto, executive director of the coalition, which includes Baker County.

The survey was conducted on behalf of the Baker County Infant Mortality Task Force, which aims to prevent the death of babies before their first birthday, and began in January.

The task force hoped to discover what practices were already in place here related to new mothers breastfeeding in the workplace or pumping breast milk for feeding later.

Health experts say that breastfeeding is most important in the months immediately following birth, but the health benefits for both mothers and babies can continue to flow long after the babies turn one.

"The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends breastfeeding exclusively for six months and continuation of breastfeeding for one year or longer as mutually desired by mother and infant," said Sara Reiger, the coalition's special projects liaison.

She supplies staff support to the Infant Mortality Task Force and contacted local employers to inquire about their breastfeeding policies.

"The task force was formed to reduce infant mortality in Baker County," she explained. "Breastfeed babies are less likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in addition to being sick less often. We are seeking opportunities to educate the community on the importance of breastfeeding and the benefits of workplace policies surrounding breastfeeding."

The task force and the health department are planning a presentation to Baker County Chamber of Commerce members in the near future to express the importance of having sound breastfeeding policies, and having them in writing.

So what makes for a good

breastfeeding policy?

Ms. Reiger says its providing a private, clean and comfortable area for new mothers to express milk, and sufficient break time to do it.

"Northeast Florida State Hospital and the Baker County School District have written policies that include these elements," she said.

The state hospital, with prior approval, also allows women to leave the facility to go to a child care location to breastfeed, or for the babies to be brought to the hospital for the same purpose, said Ms. Reiger.

The school district policy provides for "a private area free from intrusions" and "reasonable unpaid breaks for up to one year" for the purposes of breastfeeding.

Winn-Dixie also sets aside a dedicated area for breastfeeding or pumping during work breaks. Another large retailer, Walmart, directs mothers to dressing rooms for the activity on their lunch breaks.

Ed Fraser Hospital doesn't have a formal policy, but employees are given a private space and breaks for breastfeeding purposes upon request.

Under the Affordable Care Act of 2010, employers are required to have a place, other than a bathroom, for new mothers to breastfeed or pump and "reasonable" break time for doing so. Employers with fewer than 50 employees can seek an exemption to this provision of the law if complying with it creates a "undue hardship."

Florida, meanwhile, has made it legal for moms to breastfeed in public, and exempts the act from public indecency laws.

Neither state laws nor federal laws require employers to compensate mothers while they are breastfeeding or pumping.

"If an organization does not have a breastfeeding policy, that raises a red flag," Ms. Reiger said. "To appropriately support a breastfeeding mother, workplaces need to provide a written policy. Having women use a restroom or not providing her with a private place to express milk or not allowing her to express milk would be characteristics of a bad policy. Not having a workplace policy could also potentially deter women from initiating breastfeeding or continuing breastfeeding and that would limit the important benefits breastfeeding provides."

According to data collected by the Florida Department of

BREASTFEEDING INITIATION RATES

BAKER COUNTY	FLORIDA
71.8%	81%

EXCLUSIVE WIC BREASTFEEDING RATES IN BAKER COUNTY

3 MONTHS AFTER BIRTH	6 MONTHS AFTER BIRTH
13.6%	17.8%

Breast milk benefits

<p>FOR BABIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> it is the most complete form of nutrition for babies It's easier for most babies to digest than formula it changes naturally to meet the growing needs of babies it has antibodies & substances essential to brain development breastfed babies have lower risk for diarrhea, ear infections, respiratory infections; & later in life diabetes, obesity & asthma 	<p>FOR MOMMIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> helps thier uterus return to pre-pregnancy size and bodies to pre-pregnancy weight more quickly reduces postpartum bleeding reduces risks associated with type 2 diabetes reduces risks associated with breast and ovarian cancers
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Information from the Women's Information Center and the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition

Health, the breastfeeding rate in Baker County in 2012, the latest year for which figures are available, was 71.8 percent. Statewide the rate was 81 percent.

Ms. Reiger said those figures are relatively high compared to the rate among clients of the Baker County WIC (Women, Infant and Children) program.

She said the WIC office in Macclenny reports just 13.6 percent of clients breastfeed at three months after birth and 17.8 percent after the six-month mark.

"The increase is due to some mothers not initially coming into WIC for the early postpartum appointments," noted Ms. Reiger.

Breastfeeding resources

There are three ways new moms can access support and information regarding breastfeeding in Baker County:

- WIC, located at 85 W. Railroad Ave., serves low to moderate income women who are pregnant and up through the postpartum period, as well as children through age 5.

WIC promotes breastfeeding and has trained professionals ready to assist mothers in mak-

Deadline for scholarships

May 30 is the deadline to apply for one of two college scholarships available to Baker County residents who did not attend college after high school graduation.

Applicants must plan to attend a college or other post-secondary training institute and have either a regular high school diploma or GED for at least three years. They must also demonstrate a financial need, complete 24 semester hours within two years.

For other details, contact Shirley Crawford with the Baker County Education Foundation at 259-0428.

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