

Healthy moms, fewer baby deaths

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Improving the health of mothers and women of child-bearing age is the best way to reduce the county's infant mortality rate, say representatives of the Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition, including its local coordinator Sue Combs of the health department.

She and the regional nonprofit's infant mortality review manager Tracy Claveau presented the results of a review of infant deaths here in recent years during this week's Healthy Baker meeting the morning of June 13. They continued discussing the topic at the Baker County Infant Mortality Task Force meeting later that afternoon at the health department on West Lowder St.

Baker County has historically had a higher infant mortality rate than the state, but has narrowed the gap in recent years, explained Ms. Claveau. In 2014, the county's rate dipped below the state rate for the first time, reaching 5.5 deaths per 1000 live births compared to 6 deaths per 1000 live births statewide.

The presentations were an effort to gather community input for the state's new Healthy Babies initiative, a \$1.4 million program with two aims: addressing underlying social factors that impact maternal and child health, like a lack of education and poverty, and reducing the racial disparity in infant mortality, which is the relatively higher rate of infant deaths before the age of 1 among minorities and particularly black women compared to white women.

"This project engages the department's 67 local health offices and numerous partners within each county to address disparities with evidence-based interventions," reads a Florida Department of Health press release from March about the initiative.

"The data shows we have some maternal health issues that greatly contribute to infant mortality," explained Ms. Combs, who took over management of the county's Healthy Start program last year.

Those issues — including obesity, tobacco use and a lack of early prenatal care — are often precursors to premature births, which are the leading cause of infant mortality here.

"That is not anything new or unusual. That is the leading cause of death in most communities," said Ms. Claveau.

The second leading



Healthy Start coordinator Sue Combs discusses infant mortality.

cause of infant mortality here is genetic disorders, also known as congenital abnormalities, followed by Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SUIDS. Ms. Claveau said the latter is the infant death category used for babies who die by accidental suffocation or strangulation in bed, often the result of unsafe sleeping conditions, including children sleeping in the same bed as their parents.

Since 2012, there have been 14 infant deaths in Baker County and two of the babies died as a result of unsafe sleeping conditions, one in 2013 and another in 2015, she explained.

Ms. Combs said that in addition to poor maternal health, women having children over the age of 35 or having babies too soon after a previous birth are at a higher risk of having premature births and babies with other health challenges. It's recommended women wait 18 months after a birth before becoming pregnant again.

Ms. Combs said waiting that long gives mothers the opportunity to recover physically, emotionally and financially from a previous child. Not doing so "drives up the chance for pre-term delivery, low birth weight infants and longer stays in the NICU [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit]," she said.

While the infant mortality rate has fallen in the county since reaching a high of 19 per 1000 live births in 2005 when seven babies died, there were four deaths here last year. But public health officials see that as an opportunity for further improvement rather than celebration.

Mrs. Combs outlined several areas where the community can affect change.

On average about 17 percent of pregnant women here admit to smoking during pregnancy, 26

percent are obese and 31 percent receive late prenatal care, defined as after the first trimester, or not at all. Some 6.5 percent of pregnant women in Baker County received no prenatal care in 2014, compared to 5.3 percent statewide.

While some women may avoid first trimester prenatal care intentionally, obstetrics physicians are only available in Baker County on a limited basis.

Mrs. Combs noted that one such provider sees patients one day per week and another is here only a half-day each week. "We're proud to have those but we could certainly use a full-time prenatal care provider," said Mrs. Combs.

More specifically, Ms. Claveau reported, among the 14 infant death cases here since 2012, three involved mothers who were tobacco users, two admitted to using drugs or alcohol and four were clinically obese.

"We look at those and say that's what we have to work on," she said.

In terms of social factors affecting infant mortality here, Ms. Combs identified relatively low levels of education that can lead to low-wage jobs and a lack of resources for many households. That financial stress can then lead to drug, alcohol and tobacco use, and in turn, poor maternal and child health outcomes.

"It's like a domino effect," said Mrs. Combs.

She said according to the most recent state statistics, 17 percent of infants here are born to mothers who don't have a high school diploma, only 11 percent of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, nearly one in five residents over age 25 lack a high school diploma and 40 percent of homes here have female heads of household in poverty.

"That's huge," she said.

"That means there's no fatherhood involvement, no male influence in the home."

There are some strengths within the social fabric of Baker County, however.

She said just 12.2 percent of all families live in poverty, which is near the state rate of 11.9 percent.

The homeownership rate is more than 75 percent, the participation rate among eligible women in WIC, the state's nutrition program for mothers with children under age 5, is above 80 percent and the breastfeeding rate is about 75 percent.

There is also plenty of support available from the health department in terms of nutrition education and tobacco cessation classes, from family and church congregations, and the high school graduation rate is rising, said Mrs. Combs.

The rate of premature births, the leading cause of infant deaths here, has also been declining, she said.

Outgoing health department administrator Kerry Dunlavy applauded the initiative, saying it was important because infant deaths are sentinel events for communities, pointing to health issues within the larger population.

"We certainly want to keep the deaths of our babies very, very low; non-existent we would like," she said.

The infant mortality task force will convene again to begin discussing an action plan to target some of the areas identified during the presentations.

Jax teen drowns

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the victim's body about 5 p.m., said sheriff's office operations chief Major Gerald Gonzalez later that evening as authorities were still working to positively identify the victim and notify next of kin.

Witnesses said they and others swimming near the victim initially thought he was playing a joke.

"Half of them were standing up on the sand bar and before the sand bar there's a deep hole and that's where he was struggling, but it was over like that," a man said before police asked everyone to clear the river banks to give the search teams plenty of space to maneuver.

"There were so many people around him, they could of, but they thought he was playing, too. That's how quick it happened," he said.