

Hillsborough In Study Of High Rate Of Black Infant Mortality

By Nicola White of The Tampa Tribune

Published: February 27, 2008

TAMPA - Black babies in Hillsborough County are four times more likely to die in infancy than white babies.

That's far too many deaths, health care and social services advocates say.

Thursday, a committee of doctors, social services agencies and politicians will meet at the Stetson University College of Law to investigate why black babies here die and what can be done to prevent it.

It's an ongoing discussion that started last year when two state legislators – Rep. Betty Reed and State Sen. Arthenia Joyner, both Democrats from Tampa – pushed for the Black Infant Mortality Bill, which earmarks \$1 million to study why the disparity exists. It also calls for more support for health and social services aimed at healthy pregnancies, safe deliveries and supporting newborns and their families through the critical, most vulnerable first months of life.

Eight Florida counties, including Broward, Duval, Gadsden, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach, Putnam and Hillsborough, are participating in the study.

Solutions are not cut and dried; socioeconomic disparities often contribute to poor health for black babies. Likewise, moms who don't start out healthy during their pregnancies are more likely to deliver premature babies or babies with other problems.

"This is not an easy issue to address," said Leisa Stanley, associate executive director of the Healthy Start Coalition of Hillsborough County.

When babies die, it can signal larger communitywide health and social issues. For example, although sleeping with an infant can be safe, it's potentially deadly if not done the right way; adults can crush and smother newborns. But Stanley has heard some inner-city mothers say they sleep in the same beds as their babies because they live in dangerous neighborhoods and want to keep their children safe.

Doctors and social workers need to know about these concerns when talking to mothers, she said.

The same goes for prenatal care and encouraging a mom to be healthy during her pregnancy, says Bob Yelverton, administrative director of Tampa Bay Women's Care and head of one of the committees investigating infant deaths here.

A doctor can tell a mother to eat healthy or exercise, but if the mother can't afford nutritious food or feels unsafe walking in her neighborhood at , the advice is for naught, he said.

Studying the causes of infant mortality is a step in the right direction to preventing deaths, he said.

"The answers aren't really known. They can range all the way from genetic issues to socioeconomic issues associated with it. They're very complex," he said. "We don't know at this point where to point those fingers."

Reporter Nicola M. White can be reached at (813) 259-7616 or nwhite1@tampatrib.com.