

Overview

Spectrum Health's Maternal Infant Health Program offers personalized services to help eligible mothers and families in Kent County, Mich., have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby. Augmented by the federally funded Strong Beginnings program, which provides additional services to eligible African American and Hispanic women in Grand Rapids, Spectrum assists with locating health care services, finding transportation, and understanding the baby's growth and development.

Today's comprehensive support services began in 2000 when hospital and community leaders joined forces to address a Black infant mortality rate that was up to five times higher than the white rate. The result was the creation of the Infant Health Action Team.

In 2003, the community was further galvanized by new data demonstrating that at 22.4 Black infant deaths per 1,000 live births, Grand Rapids had the highest Black infant mortality rate in Michigan. In response, the Action Team successfully applied for a large, multi-year federal Healthy Start grant, managed by Spectrum Health, which funded new efforts to address health disparities in the African American — and later, Latinx — communities.

Over time, these collaborative efforts expanded to include home visits by nurses and social workers, the addition of community health workers, behavioral health, a fatherhood initiative, community education and breastfeeding support groups, among other services. All programs have a strong emphasis on promoting racial equity and anti-racism work.

Impact

A seven-year study by Michigan State University revealed success, as defined by a significant reduction in preterm and very preterm birth rates and higher rates of adequate prenatal care, completing postpartum exams and well-child visits. The rolling infant mortality rate for program participants was 5.7 per thousand live births as of December 2019, just slightly higher than the white rate of 4.4/1,000 in 2018.

The infant mortality among African Americans in Kent County fell by 46% in the past 12 years due in part to the Strong Beginnings community collaborative.

This came in addition to the harder-to-measure impact that Spectrum Health's programs have had on individual lives, such as helping clients obtain housing, education and employment, as well as navigating the legal system to regain custody of their children.

The architects of Spectrum Health's two-decade effort to eliminate disparities in birth outcomes offer some takeaway lessons from their quest:

- Enlisting community health workers — local people who in some cases were themselves Strong Beginnings program participants — was vital to success. "They have a cultural sensitivity far in excess that I will ever be able to exhibit that can create almost instantaneous trust and help to navigate these complex situations," said Kenneth Fawcett Jr., M.D., vice president of Spectrum Health Healthier Communities Department.



- Embrace the role of fathers. Participation in the Action Team has grown from the original 12 members in 2000 to 85 people, including community residents and program participants, working on 12 different committees related to maternal-child health. Leaders attribute the interest and commitment of the broader community in part to the program's embrace of the role of fathers, who are often the forgotten piece in the maternal-child health equation. They have learned that fathers need and want to be included, and fathers have indicated their support for maternal health programs that offer them a defined role.

- Flexibility is key. By offering behavioral health services in the home, in conjunction with maternal health services, care providers have been able to overcome barriers around transportation and stigma, achieving a 90% engagement rate in mental health services, thus improving birth outcomes. Spectrum Health leaders call flexibility regarding where services are offered a "differentiator."

- Spectrum Health was the first in Michigan to utilize social impact bonds, or "SIBs," a funding mechanism that represents a unique blend between investing and philanthropy. As an alternative to traditional grant funding, SIBs tie compensation to actual, achieved outcomes, as opposed to being compensated for the number of activities that Spectrum Health engages in. Fawcett said the creation of sustainable funding is "really improving birth outcomes and starting kids on the proper launch angle for successful lives."

Future Goals

Moving ahead, Spectrum Health will continue its work toward eliminating disparities in birth outcomes by

reaching greater numbers of expectant mothers. It will concentrate on using technology in new ways, such as creating a home visiting program without visiting the home, relying on virtual connections and telephonic connections to distribute a "lighter" version of its programs to impact more people.

Spectrum Health is interested in pursuing a Medicaid waiver that would allow women across all of Michigan to benefit from similar programs, not only those that reside in Kent County.

Finally, program organizers intend to train more facilitators in health equity and social justice issues, while reaching the general community with the same messaging.



Fawcett is optimistic that the sense of community collaboration that has attended the growth of its maternal health programs so far will continue to sustain it in years to come.

"We're all kicking the ball in the same direction. When you surround yourself with like-minded people, it's almost limitless what you can achieve," said Fawcett. "It's very impressive how innovative Spectrum Health has been in improving

the health not just of mothers and babies, but entire communities through the Strong Beginnings program."

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