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City Officials Announce Drop in Infant Mortality Rate

Decreases in prematurity-related deaths help improve city rate

Fewer babies died from complications of prematurity before reaching their first birthday in 2007, a significant step toward improving infant mortality rates in Milwaukee, said Mayor Barrett, Alderman Michael Murphy and Commissioner of Health Bevan K. Baker during a press conference today to announce a reduction in the infant mortality rate in the City of Milwaukee.

Data released by the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services show that the number of infants who died in Milwaukee declined from 140 in 2006 to 111 in 2007, a 20% drop. As a result, Milwaukee's infant mortality rate decreased from 12.3 per 1,000 live births in 2006 to 9.8 in 2007.

The decline is attributed to a reduction of infant deaths due to complications of prematurity. The percentage of such deaths dropped from 57% in 2006 to 45% in 2007. Prematurity --- defined as birth prior to 37 weeks pregnancy --- is the leading cause of death within a baby's first month of life in Milwaukee and nationally. It is also a major cause of long-term health problems, including cerebral palsy, mental retardation, blindness, and chronic lung problems.

"All deaths are tragic, but they're particularly concerning when they involve our smallest citizens," said Mayor Tom Barrett. "I am glad to see the progress that Milwaukee is making toward decreasing infant mortality rates in the city."

The new state data also highlighted decreases in infant mortality rates across most racial and ethnic groups. In Milwaukee, the black infant mortality rate decreased from 18.2 in 2006 to 14.1 in 2007, while the Hispanic infant mortality rate decreased from 6.1 to 5.3 during the same period. The white infant mortality rate also decreased from 7.3 in 2006 to 6.2 in 2007.

"Milwaukee continues to make steady progress towards reducing the infant mortality rate and bridging the black to white disparity gap," said Commissioner of Health Bevan K. Baker. "While the downward trend is encouraging, there is much work to do if Milwaukee is to meet the national goal of 4.5 deaths per one thousand births and eliminate disparities between racial and ethnic groups. In Milwaukee, African American infants still die at more than twice the rate of whites."

While the annual infant mortality rate tends to fluctuate from year to year, it is important to highlight that the 3-year rolling average also shows encouraging results. The 2004-2006 average of 11.9 dropped to 11.2 in 2005-2007.

However, a discouraging trend in the 2007 data was the number of infants who died after being placed in an unsafe sleep environment, which includes not placing a baby in a crib or bassinet or placing a baby in a crib or bassinet that contains toys or soft bedding. These deaths increased from 15% in 2006 to 28.8% in 2007.

Though Milwaukee's infant mortality rate declined in 2007, the city has seen an uptick in infant homicides in 2008. To date, there have been 7 infant homicides this year, compared to 1 in 2007.

Alderman Murphy emphasized the steps that individuals can take to help reduce infant mortality in Milwaukee. "I am very excited by the progress that has been made in addressing Milwaukee's infant mortality rate," he said. "I urge Milwaukeeans to review the Health Department's recommendations and follow them whenever possible."

The City of Milwaukee Health Department's recommendations to help reduce infant deaths in Milwaukee include the following:

- **Stop smoking.** Women who smoke are more likely to have a premature baby, a low birth-weight baby, or a miscarriage or stillbirth. Infants exposed to second-hand smoke have an increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).
- **Know your medical history.** A woman is at especially high risk of having a premature baby if she already has had one premature delivery before. She should work closely with her medical provider or a high-risk obstetrical provider to reduce this risk.
- **Educate yourself.** All pregnant women should be familiar with signs and symptoms of preterm labor, and see medical care immediately if they experience any vaginal bleeding or unusual cramping.
- **Get prenatal care early.** Premature babies are more likely for women who have medical problems such as high blood pressure, some of which can only be diagnosed by a doctor. Every pregnant woman should get prenatal care as early in her pregnancy as possible. If possible, get signed up for health insurance (such as BadgerCare Plus) and see a doctor even before getting pregnant.
- **Treat infections.** Dental, urinary tract and sexually transmitted infections are also associated with an increased risk for premature delivery. Prompt medical treatment is essential.
- **Practice Safe Sleep.** All infants should sleep by themselves in a crib, with a tight fitting sheet, on their backs and without bumper pads, pillows, blankets or toys. Infants should never sleep in a bed with other adults or children, and they should never be placed on a soft surface like a couch or chair to sleep.
- **Reduce Stress.** Studies show that women under chronic stress are more likely to have low birth-weight or premature babies. Work with elected officials and community leaders to help support girls, women and families, as well as to reduce poverty and racism in our community.

For more information on infant deaths or stillbirths, please contact the City of Milwaukee Health Department at 414-286-3521 or visit our Web site at www.milwaukee.gov/health.