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**Mayor Barrett to Launch Strong Baby Sanctuary Initiative**

*Collaboration with Columbia St. Mary's, faith community, and local partners to host introductory meeting March 28*

MILWAUKEE – On Saturday, March 28, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., Mayor Tom Barrett and health officials will welcome faith leaders to Columbia St. Mary's Garden Café (2350 N. Lake Dr.) to launch a year-round partnership focused on reducing preventable infant deaths. Called the Strong Baby Sanctuary initiative, the effort builds upon the collaborative work of Mayor Barrett's annual Strong Baby Sabbath, held each October, and the citywide Strong Baby campaign.

"Area faith leaders can play a crucial role in neighborhood well-being," said Mayor Tom Barrett. "In Milwaukee, too many infants continue to die because they are born too small, too soon, and because of unsafe sleeping environments. By partnering with faith communities, we can work together to provide social support and resources that will improve the health and well-being of pregnant women, new mothers, fathers and their families."

The effort supports Mayor Barrett's goal of reducing Milwaukee's overall infant mortality rate by 10 percent and the African-American infant mortality rate by 15 percent by 2017. It also supports the goal to reduce racial disparities in birth outcomes, set by the Milwaukee Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families, a collaborative co-chaired by Mayor Barrett and led by United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County.

"Columbia St. Mary's Urban Church Wellness program has built a strong partnership with area faith communities," said Bill Solberg, Director of Community Services for Columbia St. Mary's. "The Strong Baby Sanctuary initiative will extend our community outreach by assisting churches and faith communities in being safe havens where pregnant women, new mothers and new fathers can get health-related support and information."

Churches who pledge to become a Strong Baby Sanctuary will serve as a place where pregnant women and new families can be referred to an existing web of community resources or take part in church or communitywide programs that can lower stress, support wellness, and reduce preventable causes of infant death.

Data indicates that of the approximately 100 infants who die before their first birthdays in Milwaukee, nearly 60 percent of all infant deaths result from complications of prematurity. Additionally, half of the sleep-related infant deaths in Milwaukee occur to infants who were born prematurely, making prematurity a significant risk factor for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and accidental suffocation.

"Both prematurity and its complications can be prevented," said Courtney Rogaczewski, Associate State Director at March of Dimes – Wisconsin Chapter. "By collaborating with faith communities to address the complex factors that affect prematurity, we can have a positive impact on the lives of our youngest and most vulnerable residents."

The Strong Baby Sanctuary program is being planned cooperatively by Columbia St. Mary's Urban Church Wellness Program, City of Milwaukee Health Department, March of Dimes – Wisconsin Chapter, and United Way of Greater Milwaukee & Waukesha County's Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families.

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