



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2018 Entry Form

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Making an impact: Infant Mortality

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under 50,000

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

The ultimate goal of an editorial page is to advocate for an improved quality of life in its community. This editorial illustrates that fact.

Jacksonville has one of the highest rates of infant mortality in the state of Florida. Yet there has never been a study of every death during a calendar year. Our editorial calling for a complete study of every infant who died in a year resulted in a group of hospitals stepping up to fund it.

City should fund study on infant mortality

By Times-Union Editorial Board

Posted Aug 17, 2018 at 2:01 AM

There is a good reason why infant mortality is considered a leading indicator of a community's health.

When babies die before their first birthday, there are usually multiple factors involved; some are health-related, others are linked to income or lifestyle.

In 2005, the Times-Union Editorial Board reported on Jacksonville's high infant mortality rate. What followed was an extensive, impressive report from Jacksonville Community Council Inc. — and a real commitment from city leaders to do something about the crisis.

As a result, the infant deaths significantly decreased.

But soon infant mortality lost its prominent place as a community topic and, not coincidentally, our area's rates started to rise again.

In recent years, an average of 137 infants — the equivalent of eight classes of kindergartners — have been dying annually in Northeast Florida.

In addition, new hotspots have appeared: while Northwest Jacksonville has always been an area of concern, infant mortality rates have surged in the Westside and Arlington.

Troubling observations

Faye Johnson, CEO of Northeast Florida Healthy Start Coalition, spoke recently to the Times-Union Editorial Board.

Here were some of her troubling observations:

- The opioid crisis is showing up in delivery rooms; there were more than 700 area infants born with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome during 2016 alone.
- In 2017, nearly 1 in 10 babies were born with low birth weight, a contributing factor in infant mortality.
- The infant mortality rate for local African-American mothers is about twice that of white mothers. And studies have indicated that the stress of living with racial discrimination is a key factor in infant mortality. For instance, black mothers with college degrees have birth outcomes similar to white mothers with high school diplomas.

- Duval County is a hotbed for domestic violence, which is another contributing factor in infant mortality; out of Florida's 67 counties, only nine have higher rates of domestic violence than Duval.

Strategies to reduce deaths

Clearly, we need to keep refining and bolstering strategies for combating infant mortality.

Here are some of the challenges that these strategies must address:

- In some area neighborhoods there aren't many OB/GYNs; that means women without transportation must travel long distances on buses to appointments.
- There still are too many babies dying in co-sleeping conditions. This isn't always a matter of lack of knowledge, however: in some cases, mothers in crime-plagued neighborhoods may be keeping their babies close in fear of stray bullets.
- Many women still need to be educated on the importance of being physically healthy before they become pregnant. It's estimated that at least 50 percent of women who give birth in Northeast Florida are seriously overweight; this can lead to high blood pressure and premature births.
- The need to promote better family planning, which can reduce the chances of an infant death, is glaring. Ideally, babies should be born more than 18 months apart — but too many local women are having babies too close together.
- More fathers need to embrace the responsibility of being responsible fathers. Too many mothers are dealing with high-risk pregnancies without a father's support — and nearly half of all births in the region are to unmarried mothers. It's shocking that in 14 percent of the births, the father's name isn't even listed on the birth certificate. That's a pretty damning sign that too many local males simply aren't behaving like real men.

Fund a study

So what should be done?

For one, our city leaders need to rediscover infant mortality as a pressing community issue.

They can start by immediately providing the funds for a thorough review of every infant death in Duval County over a 12-month period.

Every single infant death.

Not a fraction of them. Not a “representative sample” of them.

All of them.

It's estimated that such a review would carry a one-time cost of \$50,000.

But isn't that a small price to pay compared to the cost of burying so many local infants before they ever celebrate a birthday?