

## Infant Mortality Commission Hears Presentations on Benefits of Engaged Fathers

The Commission on Infant Mortality heard from several groups working to increase fathers' engagement on the issue Tuesday, with presentations given on behalf of the Ohio Commission on Fatherhood (OCF), Dads2B and My Brother's Keeper Ohio (MBK Ohio) coalition. Alisha Brown, of the Ohio Department of Medicaid (ODM), also gave a report on community assessments conducted as a result of 131-SB332 (Jones-Tavares).

Commission co-chair Sen. Stephanie Kunze (R-Hilliard) said she hopes to introduce a "2.0" version of that bill next year, and that she plans for an additional meeting before the end of 2019.

OCF Executive Director Kimberly Dent discussed the work of her group, which is part of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS). The OCF works to train professionals, engage the community, develop policy recommendations and fund local programs, she said.

Dent's interest in the issue stems from her own experience, as she did not have a father present in her childhood and was determined not to repeat that cycle with her three children, saying she and their father were committed to co-parenting even though their own relationship didn't work out.

Having a healthy, responsible father in a child's life can lead to substantially lower odds of poverty, youth alcohol and drug use, teen pregnancy, infant mortality and child abuse and neglect, Dent said. A father's presence also results in fewer youth behavioral problems, youth academic challenges and incidences of childhood obesity and lower likelihood of both committing a crime and going to prison.

Fathers can also support mothers before and after birth, she said, including helping ensure healthier birth outcomes through reducing stress, helping travel to appointments, encouraging smoking cessation and learning more about birth and caring for infants, including through a three-hour "boot camp for new dads" at certain hospitals, taught by experienced fathers demonstrating ways to care for an infant by demonstrating with their own children, rather than a baby doll.

Co-chair Rep. Sara Carruthers (R-Hamilton) asked whether community centers such as YMCAs could provide that course as well, and Dent said medical centers are a better location due to the use of an actual baby, but some non-hospital groups have used a doll instead, even though that's less realistic.

On funding local programs, Dent discussed service areas for recent TANF-funded grantees, including Action for Children (Delaware, Franklin and Licking counties), Early Resource Childhood Center (Stark and Summit counties), Forever Dads (Morgan,

Muskingum and Perry counties), Passages (Lorain and Portage counties) and Talbert House (Butler, Hamilton and Warren counties).

The OCF also holds an annual state fatherhood conference, which will be in Columbus on May 20-21, 2020. Dent said she's hoping to have Jerry and Jessica Seinfeld at the event, as she's worked with them on fatherhood issues previously, and also hopes LeBron James will either speak in person or record a video, as he may still be playing in the postseason then.

David Fluellen, founder and CEO of Turnkey Development Institute, offered information on the "Dads2B" program developed initially with the Columbus Urban League, OCF and pre-existing "Moms2B" program. It was developed as fathers' participation at Moms2B events increased but programming specific to them wasn't offered, and now provides similar information as Moms2B while also facilitating joint programming.

Fluellen said he also works to strengthen relationships between the father and mother, including conflict resolution methods and working to address barriers, particularly when men are co-parenting their children with multiple women.

Successes Fluellen cited included connecting with over 327 fathers, supporting over 82 documented successful birth outcomes, making fathers more confident and knowledgeable about the birth process, linking them with employment services and assisting with establishing paternity and gaining visiting rights.

The Columbus Urban League was unable to continue supporting the program, he said, but he secured funding to keep it going as part of his Turnkey nonprofit organization.

Kyle Strickland, a senior legal analyst at Ohio State University's (OSU) Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, discussed structural factors that have helped shape health disparities for African-Americans as well.

This includes historical practices such as redlining, which he said leads to a decline in housing conditions, predatory lending, property value losses, foreclosure and vacancy, then increased crime and health problems and a dwindling tax base that limits services and educational quality.

Franklin County, for instance, has heavy concentrations of African-Americans on the eastern side of I-71, often in areas that also see a much higher rate of infant deaths, less opportunity, greater poverty and lead poisoning and a "devastating" difference in life expectancy.

Nationally, African-Americans are more likely to grow up in poor neighborhoods than they were 50 years ago, up from 62 percent then to 66 percent now. White children, on the other hand, saw a much more modest increase of 4 percent up to 6 percent.

To help address these issues, organizations formed local “My Brother’s Keeper” programs as part of then-President Barack Obama’s initiative, and the Kirwan Institute was contacted by U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) about helping to coordinate those programs, leading to creation of the MBK Ohio statewide coalition.

Strickland said MBK Ohio works to set the tone for statewide vision, identifies key stakeholders and nonprofit, business and philanthropic partners, focuses on supporting pathways for young black men in education and builds relationships with informal community leaders, ensuring the local groups can operate on their own power.

Rep. Erica Crawley (D-Columbus) said that Strickland’s presentation underscored the structural issues that OCF and Dads2B work to address and noted she represents East and Southeast parts of Columbus.

Arthur James, an associate clinical professor in OSU’s Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, also discussed with the commission how Ohio was just ranked as the second-worst state for black infant mortality in 2017 and has consistently been among the lowest five, even amid improvements in the white infant mortality rate. Their efforts are about giving black babies an “equal opportunity” to survive the first year of life, he said, and Crawley added that racism and implicit bias can affect women throughout the health care system including during pregnancy.

Brown said they sought local input on barriers regarding infant mortality through three focus groups and interviews with community-based organizations around Ohio. General themes they found regarding barriers were lack of empathy from providers; lack of trust in the health care system, particularly for black women; and lack of communication.

Additional themes in the last two groups -- focused specifically on black women -- included lack of social support, lack of Medicaid coverage for less traditional providers such as doulas and midwives, lack of access to Medicaid navigators and lack of community resources to help change behaviors such as smoking cessation and birth spacing. The first group was 45 percent white, Brown said, with a focus on Appalachian areas, and the groups included women who had lost children.

As a result, Brown said they were working to ensure ODM programs align with the barriers identified through their research. Crawley asked about Medicaid reimbursement for doula pre-natal support, and ODM Director Maureen Corcoran said that’s not currently eligible for reimbursement but they are funding those services in nine targeted areas in Ohio and she expects it will expand. Grantees are also required to submit requests detailing services such as community health workers, home visiting and navigators as well.