



Everything Michigan

Jackson County infant death rate at record low

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Every time a baby dies, it is someone's private tragedy. But dying babies are no longer the public disgrace of Jackson County. The county's infant death rate once stood far above the state average, a situation health officials in the 1980s called a crisis. "The state health department was appalled," said Marsha Kreucher, who then, as now, led the Community Action Agency in Jackson. "We were the second worst for infant mortality, behind Detroit. I think that shocked people." Two decades later, Jackson has made big changes for the better. Jackson County is currently at its record low rate for infant deaths, 7.1 per 1,000 births, and the rate is expected to drop further.

Over the long haul, infant mortality has been near or below the statewide rate, which is also falling, for 11 of the past 20 years. In most of the other nine years, the county rate was only marginally higher. "There's a trend here. It's not a blip on the screen," said Molly Kaser, CEO of the Center for Family Health. "We have made amazing improvements in Jackson, and I think we are poised to do a lot more."

Infant mortality, defined as babies who die within a year of birth, is a complex problem with many factors. Jackson County typically has 15 to 20 infant deaths in a year, and 46 percent are premature babies who do not survive, said Aimee Fors, health educator for the Fetal and Infant Mortality Review, a branch of the county Health Department. Birth defects cause 23 percent of infant deaths, and 18 percent are due to unsafe sleep practices, Fors said. The remaining 13 percent are classified as "other," which includes homicides, traffic crashes and all else. Two decades ago this year, Jackson first attacked its infant mortality crisis by easing a shortage of doctors for pregnant women on Medicaid.

"Many women, if they were getting care, were going to Ann Arbor or someplace else," said Kreucher. "And there was a batch that weren't getting any care at all, delivering their babies in the Foote Hospital emergency room." A prenatal clinic named the Center for Healthy Beginnings was opened by the Community Action Agency in 1991 and became an independent operation in 1995. At first, the facility now called the Center for Family Health looked like an instant cure.

Jackson County's infant death rate, expressed by health officials in three-year averages, declined for six straight years to 7.6 deaths per 1,000 births. A few years earlier, the rate had peaked at 17.3. Kaser predicted in 1996 that the

county would soon reach a goal of 7 deaths per 1,000 births. Then something unexpected happened in the late 1990s. The death rate rose again above the state average.

A Jackson County Prenatal Task Force was created in the 2000s by Allegiance Health and the Health Department to find new ways to reduce infant deaths. The task force today runs a program called "House to House" to teach neighborhood leaders about good baby care and spread word to their neighbors. "You can talk to folks all you want as a health official," Fors said, "but they listen to their neighbors, their parents, their grandparents."

Despite ups and downs, the overall direction of infant mortality has been steadily lower, now approaching the goal Kaser cited 15 years ago. The current rate of 7.1 deaths per 1,000 births is for the most recent three-year period reported, 2007-09. It is likely to drop lower when 2010 numbers are released, Fors said.

Kreucher gives much credit to Allegiance and the local medical community for making the Center for Family Health more than a "welfare clinic." "We knew we could hire some doctors and that would help," Kreucher said. "But to be really effective, we had to be completely integrated into the local health system. And that has happened."

Kaser said, "What we have in Jackson is alignment of all the major players. That does not happen often or easily."

Problems remain with infant mortality — most notably a significantly higher rate for blacks than whites — but long-term improvement is measured by more than statistics.

If the worst of Jackson County's infant death rates had stayed unchanged, more than 300 children, teenagers and young adults now living in Jackson County would have died before their first birthdays. "I think we should go lower, by all means," Kaser said. "I would hope that this is a new era."