Any news that fewer babies are dying is welcome and a cause for celebration. So local public health officials were excited at the end of May, when statistics released by the Florida Department of Health showed a marked decline in Leon County’s overall infant mortality rate and an especially sharp decline in the deaths of black babies.

However, the encouraging numbers come with a note of caution, a hint of what might be helping and an assurance that the struggle to save children is far from over.

According to the state Department of Health, from 2012 to 2013, the infant deaths per 1,000 births in Leon County fell from 9.3 to 5.3. For black babies, it fell from 15.7 to 4.8, which is well below the state rate.

There are several reasons this might be so.

There has been an all-out effort to combat the causes of infant deaths, by such groups as the Capital Area Healthy Start Coalition, Whole Child Leon, the Leon County Health Department, Brehon Family Services, the March of Dimes, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare and Florida State University’s College of Medicine. The Tallahassee Democrat has made “Healthy Babies” a priority in its reporting and community outreach for more than six years.

Over the past year, a special focus has been on preconception health — that is, the health of the mother and, indeed, the whole family even before a child is conceived.

TMH, which had faced criticism for giving infant formula to new mothers, vowed not only to increase its promotion of breastfeeding — which has been shown to help prevent sudden infant death syndrome — but to pursue accreditation as a Baby-Friendly Hospital.

Such initiatives certainly help.

But it also is possible that the dramatic gains are largely a statistical blip.

Because the numbers are so small, there are fluctuations year to year. Public health officials shy away from yearly infant mortality rates and prefer to look at a three-year rolling rate. Indeed, at the same time the infant mortality rate in Leon County was falling, the rate in neighboring Gadsden County was skyrocketing from 9.5 per 1,000 live births in 2012 (five infant deaths) to 16 per 1,000 live births last year (nine infant deaths).

The fundamentals have not changed.

Poverty continues to affect families in so many ways. Nutritious food can be hard to come by in the so-called “food deserts” found in poorer areas. Regular health care remains out of reach for many, as Florida continues to resist a Medicaid expansion that would benefit many of the working poor.

Florida has an estimated half-million children who remain uninsured, even though most would be eligible under the state’s KidCare program. More must be done to make parents aware of KidCare and help them enroll their children.

The financial issues overwhelming the Bond Community Health Center certainly aren’t helping.

We can’t just focus on infant mortality, but also must remain aware of the social determinants, chief among which is poverty.

We know what we’re up against. We know the problem of infant mortality won’t be solved over a year or three years, but rather, over a generation.

But know that this community — and especially the Tallahassee Democrat — are not done with this issue. It must remain an ongoing focus, and advocates must keep pressing for solutions. But a little good news doesn’t hurt.

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