

Infant mortality still a Leon County concern



Sean Rossman, Democrat staff writer

11:14 a.m. EST February 10, 2016

Leon County's infant mortality statistics are similar to what they have been in past years.

Black babies are still more likely to die before their first birthdays than white babies. The problems that lead to those outcomes — a lack of proper health care, education, nutrition and jobs — remain the same.

At a workshop in County Commission Chambers on Tuesday, Leon County commissioners heard four experts expound on the county and state's record on infant mortality — the death of a baby before she or he turns 1 and an indicator of an area's overall health.

Dr. Joedrecka Brown, MD, an associate professor in the Florida State University College of Medicine's Department of Family Medicine and Rural Health, said a black baby is twice as likely to die in the first year than a white baby and a black mother is three to four times more likely to suffer pregnancy complications than white mothers.

A litany of societal issues, she said, can contribute to health complications: Unemployment, poor access to food, education, work environment, health care services and sometimes race.

In 2014, the most recent Florida Department of Health numbers, 22 babies died before their first birthday, a rate of 7.1 per 1,000 live births. Of those 22, 15 babies were black and five were white. In Florida, 1,327 babies died in 2014, a rate of 6 per 1,000. Of those statewide numbers, 538 were black and 688 were white.

While Leon County and state infant mortality numbers have decreased over the last decade, limiting infant deaths is still a priority. Local organizations like the Capital Area Healthy Start Coalition, the Brehon Institute for Family Services and Whole Child Leon have made it their mission to assist families in order to assure healthy babies.

Leon County's Primary Health Care Program, which provides funding for primary care services, has hosted community workshops on the issue. It also received a 2011 grant to provide health education to African American women and girls.

The Florida Department of Health in Leon County expects to receive a \$30,000 federal grant through the state's Florida Healthy Baby Initiative. The department will use \$10,000 to support breastfeeding policies, \$15,000 for a Baby Steps to Baby Friendly program, which promotes breastfeeding, and \$5,000 to prevent child abuse and maltreatment.

The commission voted to have Leon County government participate in upcoming community events related to infant mortality in order reach more health professionals and interact with families on the south side. The commission also vowed to add \$200,000 in funding for the Community Human Services Partnership, which serves local social service agencies.

Commissioner Kristin Dozier suggested forming a technical advisory committee to review research and data in order to better inform the commission on policy decisions related to infant mortality. Commissioner Nick Maddox stressed the county needs to set goals and come up with a plan to address the issue.

Contact Sean Rossman at srossman@tallahassee.com (<mailto:srossman@tallahassee.com>) or follow [@SeanRossman](https://twitter.com/SeanRossman) (<https://twitter.com/SeanRossman>) on Twitter.

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