

On behalf of our babies

Region offers abundant resources to help in reducing troubling infant mortality numbers

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Meg Distler

On a busy afternoon, I answered a phone call in the office to hear a teenage girl crying. She had just discovered she was pregnant and wanted help to have a healthy baby. She felt frightened and alone.

That was 20 years ago, and I was grateful that I had a phone number to share of professionals who were prepared to help her.

Today, I have 37 additional phone numbers and web addresses to share.

This is critical. In Allen County, we have a crisis: Too many infants are dying before their first birthday and pregnant women are struggling alone. The Indiana State Department of Health reported that of the 5,270 babies born in Allen County in 2015, 2,424 – or 46 percent – were born to single, pregnant women and most had minimal resources. Tragically, 103 local babies died before their first birthday, according to the Allen County Health Department 2015 annual report. In fact, the rate of infants dying locally in Allen County is among the worst in the state and nation. The State Department of Health has declared infant mortality the No. 1 health issue in Indiana.



*Meg Distler is executive director of
St. Joseph Community Health Foundation.*

The good news is that there are at least 38 local programs that are responding to this crisis. In my role at the St. Joseph Community Health Foundation, I have the opportunity to support and fund many innovative, caring professionals and volunteers through grants. Using a variety of solutions, equal to the diversity of our new parents, these programs include:

- Women's Care Center and A Hope Center, which help more than 50 percent of all new parents locally, providing free pregnancy testing and assistance in connecting with medical professionals and other services, such as parenting classes.
- Christ Child Society's Crib Club, A Hope Center's Earn While You Learn, and Associated Churches' ABaby's Closet, which provide free baby supplies.
- Healthier Moms & Babies, which provides education and case management for at-risk pregnant women and their families.
- Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services, which operate ECHO for pregnant and parenting teens – assisting them in developing life skills and graduating from high school as well as accessing appropriate prenatal care and raising a healthy baby.
- A Mother's Hope, which will soon open its doors as the first homeless shelter for pregnant women.
- Chi Eta Phi Sorority, which released educational videos helping parents to keep their infants healthy and safe.
- SCAN's Healthy Families, which counsels at-risk families on effective parenting.
- McMillen Health, which just launched www.babieslove.org to quickly connect new moms with local resources.

These organizations and others complement the excellent work of the medical community at Lutheran, Parkview and Neighborhood Health Clinic. Collectively, these programs are helping young families access quality information, medical providers, insurance, housing, education and counseling, and addressing their concerns.

How can you help? On March 16, the results of Allen County's Fetal Infant Mortality Review were released. This study of how to prevent deaths of local babies concluded the causes were varied. A key finding, however, was that deaths might have been prevented if the family had been referred to appropriate resources.

You can be the connection. If you recognize that a newly expecting parent is struggling, refer them to one of the programs mentioned or www.babieslove.org. Request a free Prenatal Resource Directory at St. Joseph Community Health Foundation's website, www.sjchf.org, and share the information. Consider donating money or your time as a volunteer to any of the programs. Healthy families grow when a community cares. We each can make a difference by being informed because you never know when you may be called upon to share an important number.