

Ebel: Working to reduce infant mortality in Licking County

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Governor Mike DeWine has established a Home Visiting Advisory Committee that is charged with analyzing the current situation and making recommendations for change that will result in tripling the number of families currently served by state funded home visiting programs.

This is largely in response to Ohio's abysmal infant mortality rates. Each year approximately 1,000 infants in Ohio die before they reach their first birthday. Ohio's rate of 7.2 deaths per 1,000 live births is tied with Georgia for 8th worst in the country. The average U.S. infant mortality rate is 5.8 per 1,000. Most shocking is the racial disparity, with black infants in Ohio dying at three times the rate as white infants.

In Licking County during 2018 we had 10 infants who died before their first birthday, for a rate of 5.0 per 1,000, although our three-year average remains high at 7.3 per 1,000.

The leading causes of infant death in Ohio are prematurity (born before 37 weeks of pregnancy), birth defects, obstetric conditions, external injury and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Improvements in early prenatal care and making sure families have the information and resources they need to get a healthy start can help reduce many infant mortality risk factors.

Home visiting programs for pregnant women and young children provide evidence based, cost effective services that improve the health of mothers, children, and families. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.

A typical home visiting program offers an array of services, including:

- Providing information and guidance on a wide range of topics including breastfeeding, safe sleep practices, injury prevention, and nutrition.
- Teaching positive parenting skills and building positive parent-child interactions.
- Promoting early learning in the home, with an emphasis on strong communication between parents and children that stimulates early language development.
- Conducting screenings and providing referrals to address postpartum depression, substance abuse, and family violence.
- Screening children for developmental delays and facilitating early diagnosis and intervention for autism and other developmental disabilities.
- Connecting families to other services and resources as appropriate.

Hopefully the governor's proposal to expand home visiting will expand eligibility guidelines, increase provider reimbursement to cover program costs, and increase public awareness and participation in these valuable programs.

Existing local voluntary home visiting programs for pregnant women and children 0 to 3 in Licking County include Help Me Grow (740) 349-6166 x230, and Early Head Start (740) 349-8606. In addition, the Licking County Health Department and Licking Memorial Hospital both offer free newborn nurse home visiting programs for new moms.

Submitted by Licking County Health Commissioner, Joe Ebel, R.S., M.S., M.B.A.

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