

Alabama Launches Campaign to Reduce Infant Deaths

"We believe there are places we can make a real difference,"

Don Williamson, State Health Officer says

Montgomery Advertiser

January 13, 2014

The state on Friday introduced a campaign that will aim to decrease infant mortality.

The "State of Champions — Alabama's Campaign for Healthy Babies" is meant to help reduce the risk of unplanned pregnancies, reduce the cost of ongoing healthcare needs of children and adults with special needs and disabilities, and improve the health of newborns and mothers by facilitating healthy spacing between pregnancies.

The campaign was introduced at a conference at the Alabama Activity Center.

"We believe there are places we can make a real difference," Don Williamson, state health officer with the Alabama Department of Public Health said at the conference. "There are things we can do about it."

Alabama is one of five states the National Governors Association selected to participate in a Learning Network on Improving Birth Outcomes in the U.S. The learning network's goal is to assist states in developing, aligning and implementing their key policies related to the improvement of birth outcomes, as measured by the incidence of preterm births and infant mortality.

Of the 519 infant deaths in 2012, 16.8 percent were sleep-related. Research shows that unsafe sleep environments, socio-economic background, life stressors, smoking and pre-term birth contribute to infant mortality. Breastfeeding decreased infant mortality.

"This creates an opportunity in making sure the kids have their own space," Williamson said. "It might not save all 16 percent because we don't understand all the causes, but it will save some of the children."

The leading factor that contributes to infant death in Alabama is low birthweight (LBW). LBW is defined as weighing less than 2,500 grams (less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces).

The percent of all live LBW births decreased to 10.0 in 2011. However, LBW infants accounted for 68.4 percent of the 2011 infant deaths and were 20 times more likely to die than infants of normal weight. The babies are at risk for developing major long-term physical and cognitive problems with consequences impacting families and state resources.

The state plan will consist of launching a public awareness campaign to promote safe sleep, smoking cessation, breastfeeding and eliminating non-medically indicated elective deliveries before 39 weeks gestation.

"Because of convenience, primarily, some people like to induce maybe before the 39th week, and statistics show that if you induce before the 39th week, the number of babies that have to be placed in the (NICU) goes up significantly," Gov. Robert Bentley said at the conference.

Asked how he plans to reduce the incidence of that, Bentley answered: "Well, you don't pay for it. You just say, we're not going to fund that" in Medicaid. Bentley did point out there are instances, or emergencies, that arise in which a baby does have to be delivered early.

Pushing deliveries to 39 and 40 weeks will save lives, Williamson said. He said he spoke to a colleague in Texas and "Medicaid stopped paying for early term elected deliveries. They also got Blue Cross to do the same thing. They closed NICUs in Texas because the demand is no longer there.

"They survived."