

Overview

About eight out of 1,000 babies born in Delaware die before their first birthday, compared with a national rate of about six out of 1,000. To reduce the rate of premature births and infant mortality, Christiana Care Health System's Healthy Beginnings program, in partnership with the Delaware Division of Public Health, brings together preconception care, which identifies and addresses risks to future pregnancy; pregnancy planning to guide women through the critical first steps that can set the stage for a healthy pregnancy; and prenatal care that promotes the well-being of mother and baby from conception to childbirth.

Christiana Care works with a citywide team of health ambassadors in partnership with local community centers, Henrietta Johnson Medical Center, and Westside Family Healthcare to connect pregnant women and new parents to health care (including future family planning and contraception), social services, education and home health visiting programs. Each year since 2013, Christiana Care and community partners have hosted an educational community baby shower with topics ranging from the benefits of breastfeeding to the importance of safe sleep habits for infants, and donated gifts and prizes for participants, including breast pumps and baby clothes. Christiana Care's Pediatrics Program partners with Delaware Health and Social Services in the Child Development Watch program to provide early intervention services, enhance the development of infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays, and enhance the capacity of their families to meet the needs of their young children.

Books are a staple in Christiana Care's pediatrics practices, and staff at Christiana Care's Rocco A. Abessinio Family Wilmington Health Center encourages reading at every visit. As part of the health system's Healthy Babies Begin Here project, parents



Patricia Hall and her family, husband Carlton Hall, Jr., baby Melody, three-year-old Luke and four-year-old Carlton III, live in Wilmington. Hall participated in Christiana Care classes and support programs for expectant mothers in a group setting that provides a mom-to-be with education on how to nurture herself and her baby before and after giving birth.

receive a gift pack including basic baby supplies and a book. Christiana Care is a site for the Reach Out and Read program, a national nonprofit organization that gives young children a foundation for success by incorporating books into pediatric care and encourages parents or caregivers to read aloud to children. During orientation, all Christiana Care Med-Peds residents participate in a poverty simulation, a guided experience designed to simulate the challenges of living with limited resources and help residents to better understand and empathize with Christiana Care patients' everyday stressors.

A team of social workers helps connect Healthy Beginnings participants to community programs and resources to meet their family's unique needs. The program also includes a legal partnership, with attorneys in the health center to help parents with issues such as domestic violence or working with

landlords to mitigate housing challenges. Meanwhile, because many patients in the program live in a food desert, social workers can connect them with an urban garden program where they can pick up fresh vegetables.

“This isn’t just about medical care – it’s also about the social determinants of the health of a family,” says Matthew Hoffman, M.D., chair of obstetrics and gynecology. “Rather than just delving into medical issues, we want to address nutrition, mental health, smoking cessation, and more. We’re interested in wrapping around the family to help them on a healthy life course.”

Impact

Christiana Care Health Ambassadors reach more than 500 neighbors each year at dozens of events throughout the community. More than 100 parents and parents-to-be attend each annual community baby shower; more than 45,000 books are shared with children in need, and the health system has now presented more than 9,000 volunteer-made quilts, along with sleep sacks, car seats, toothbrushes, socks and oral thermometers. These efforts have brought about health improvements for their patients.

“We’ve seen a slow but steady decrease in the rate of pre-term births since the launch of this program,” says Hoffman. “The state recently conducted a study and found that we had a 14 percent drop in premature births when compared with like women who were not enrolled in the program.”

Lesson Learned

By coordinating with community resources, Christiana Care strengthens its ability to place patients and their families on the path to wellness.

“We had to acknowledge that we can’t solve all the world’s problems,” Hoffman says. “Doctors are

great at medicine, but not necessarily social determinants. That’s not what they’re trained for. Our social workers work one-on-one with patients to find out what they need for the success of their family and connect them with key community partners who can help solve their problems.”



Carlton Hall III is thriving today, thanks in part to the great start he and his mother received through the CenteringPregnancy program that helped her to be a well-prepared mom for her first-born child.

Future Goals

Christiana Care is developing a collaboration with the community agency Reeds Refuge, to link underserved children with dental care through Christiana Care’s dental residency training program. Once care is established, ongoing treatment or preventive care appointments will be made.

The organization is also working to develop an app to help pregnant women identify and obtain what they need to maintain their health.

“Women often view pregnancy as an opportunity to implement healthier behaviors,” Hoffman says, “so this app will be designed to assist with that.”


Meanwhile, another app is being developed to help direct patients to community resources.

“It’s an issue of consistency and becoming a trusted partner,” Hoffman explains. “When you have the same social worker who knows you, knows what your issues are – whether it’s food insecurity or you want to quit smoking – you can stay engaged. We want to build and maintain those bonds and our understanding of the community. Prenatal and post-partum care don’t just happen in doctor’s offices.”

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