

State Health Department and African-American Sororities Work Together to Reduce Infant Mortality

An infant dies almost every day in Arkansas, and rates are especially high in the African American community. In response, two of the Arkansas Department of Health's offices and the Arkansas Children's Hospital called on four African American sororities' state graduate chapters to become public health educators and champions.

Sisters United is a culturally sensitive, grassroots public health campaign aimed at raising awareness about the burden of infant mortality, associated risk factors, and how to prevent these tragedies. This campaign is the first time the four African-American sororities of the National Pan-Hellenic Council—Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho—have taken up an issue collectively. Initially, members were unaware of the significant racial disparities in infant mortality, but once they learned more about the data, the members were eager to mobilize around the issue and serve as peer educators to share information with the African-American community.

In 2009, 318 of Arkansas' babies died before their first birthdays. African-American infants die at more than twice the rate of white or Hispanic children in Arkansas and across the United States. The state's infant mortality rate is 8.0 per 1,000 live births, higher than the 2010 national average of 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births. Among African-Americans, the infant mortality rate is 12.9 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Steps Taken:

- The Arkansas Department of Health (ADH) incorporates promoting health equity into all of its work. This overarching goal is part of ADH's [Strategic Map: FY 2012-2014](#).
- One strategy to achieve greater health equity is to focus on high-burden health issues, including infant mortality. The infant mortality rate in Arkansas had plateaued and was holding steady until 2009, when the numbers spiked again. The rate has come down since 2009, but ADH used the increase as an opportunity to mobilize its offices to do more to prevent these deaths and achieve health equity among racial and ethnic populations.
- The Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities (OMHHD), a division within ADH, received a \$6,000 grant from ADH in 2012 to administer the Sisters United campaign, while the Family Health Branch provided staff time to help with the effort. The Arkansas Children's Hospital also assisted by donating staff time and expertise to develop train-the-trainer programs and train the sorority members.
- ADH launched Sisters United in 2012. During the early stages of the planning process, OMHHD relied heavily on personal connections to get the program going and leveraged the fact that some staff members were also sorority members.

- African-American babies account for 20 percent of births, but 33 percent of infant deaths.
- All 41 graduate chapters of the four African-American sororities in the state are part of the campaign.
- Sisters United encourages African-American women to take folic acid, get flu shots, breastfeed, and follow safe sleep guidelines.

- In an effort to help the cause, an African-American-owned art gallery donated the space to hold a press conference to launch the campaign.
- A local African-American artist designed the campaign's logo for free and donated other art to the cause.
- In June 2012, OMHHD brought together the presidents of each sorority's graduate chapters, shared data on the burden of infant mortality, and described the role that the sororities could play in educating other African-American women about preventive activities. The sorority leaders were receptive to the message and spurred to action.
- In February 2013, ADH held a train-the-trainer conference. The sorority presidents each recruited two to three members from their chapters to attend and become trainers for the rest of the chapter and the community at large.
- Trainings focused on preventive measures that directly correlate with the leading causes of infant death. These are simple behavior changes for mothers and caregivers that go a long way toward protecting infant health. Practices include taking folic acid, getting a flu shot during pregnancy, breastfeeding, and following safe sleep practices.
- Those chosen to be trainers are effective communicators, well-respected members of their communities, and already had a foundation of trust with the target population.
- These trainers are also responsible for presenting 10-minute "mini-trainings" at monthly sorority meetings. The purpose of these short lessons is to provide information about a single preventive measure—such as safe sleep practices—and help members become comfortable sharing what they learn. Sorority members complete pre- and post-tests before and after completing the trainings.
- Because Sisters United largely relies on its members to get the message out, ADH purchased flash drives and binders for the sorority members who lead trainings for each chapter..
- A series of [You Tube videos](#), available on the Sisters United Facebook page, feature prominent health professionals who also are African-American women, most of whom belong to one of the Sisters United sororities. The health professionals talk about what women can do to reduce their risk of delivering prematurely and how to create a safe sleep environment after the baby arrives. The videos were designed to reach African-American women, but are relevant for all pregnant women or individuals caring for children.
- Every sorority chapter is encouraged to be creative and tailor their educational efforts to their communities. Chapter activities include: hosting candlelight vigils for the babies who died before their first birthdays; sponsoring public service announcements; radio interviews on the Sisters United topics; and incorporating the message into annual health fairs they sponsor in the community.
- Several chapters explored ways to involve men in an effort to share information about the risks, protective factors, and how they could reinforce the messages within their families.

Results:

- Sisters United includes all 41 Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta, and Sigma Gamma Rho graduate sorority chapters in Arkansas. The campaign had the potential to reach, at minimum, 1,670 women in 23 counties just by educating the sororities' own chapters. ADH estimates that Sisters United's impact could be as large as 316,000 African-American men and

women across the state, through collaborative efforts to educate the larger communities of every chapter.

- Collectively, the sororities have 14 websites and nine Facebook accounts with 1,100 “friends” to get the message out. As of July 2013, the [Sisters United Facebook](#) page has received 543 likes since it was posted last year.
- About half the chapters leveraged what they learned in the Sisters United trainings to apply for small grants (about \$2,000) from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to promote safe sleep practices. In total, NICHD committed \$50,000 to Arkansas for this initiative. The grants allowed 22 chapters to host community-wide safety showers for pregnant women, new moms, and others who have contact with infants. The showers target at-risk women in areas where the chapters meet or work. During these parties, the attendees discuss safe sleep practices, shaken baby syndrome, car seat safety, and baby proofing. Like other baby showers, there are games and gifts, but the focus is on safety.
- According to ADH’s preliminary report on Sisters United, “No other state health department had attempted to involve sororities to implement public health intervention of such magnitude. The innovative nature of this campaign was not only received well by the sorority groups but also gained attention of the media and the state, regional and national public health leaders.”
- Sisters United is collecting data about their work, which should be available by the end of 2013.

Lessons Learned:

- Lay people are happy to be used as resources. The sororities’ members were unaware of the burden of infant mortality in their communities, but once they were equipped with the knowledge to make a difference, they were eager to help.
- In overseeing Sisters United, ADH experienced Facebook’s pros and cons. Although it can be a good tool for communicating and broadly disseminating a message, it was difficult to entice people to post to it or use it to talk to each other. If it can secure more resources, ADH would like to try giving prizes to people who “like” the page and post information to it.
- The all-volunteer campaign also struggled a bit with the timeliness of work plans, which include the data on how each chapter reached their communities.

For more information:

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