ONE LOSS TOO MANY:

A Community Action Plan for African American Maternal & Infant Health

The racism experienced by the African American community has led to health disparities for generations and is particularly pronounced for moms and babies. This community holds solutions to save the lives of its families, friends and future generations, and yet these ideas are seldom considered. One Loss Too Many is a partnership with Mahogany Moms and Public Health Seattle & King County that centers the voices of African Americans in south King and Pierce Counties in Washington state, and the institutions that interact with them.

The Challenge

The chronic stress that African American women experience due to anti-Black racism and discrimination increases the risk of maternal death and poor birth outcomes. In the United States, Black women die from childbirth at a rate that is over three times higher than white women and are more than twice as likely to lose a baby in the first year of life than white women. Black women experience the highest rates of preterm birth, diabetes, obesity and infant mortality.

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months (as recommended by many health organizations) decreases many of the mentioned health risks for babies, and reduces the incidences of breast and ovarian cancer, and type 2 diabetes, among other risk factors for mothers. Because breastfeeding leads to improved health outcomes for both mothers and babies, human milk's ability to prevent disease should not be underestimated when addressing health disparities and inequities.

Approach

The approach of this work is community-led and collaborative, with the goal to together identify the problems at hand and create a community action plan with solutions at the individual, community and systems level. Project aspects include the following:

1. Conduct a literature review to identify, analyze and explain:
   - The impact of racism on maternal and child health in the African American community
   - The infant and maternal mortality rates for south King and Pierce Counties
   - Best practices in culturally appropriate maternal and infant care
   - The importance of first foods of the newborn and infant to lower infant mortality
   - The importance of safe infant sleep practices to lower infant mortality
2. Host community roundtable events in south King and Pierce counties to identify needs. Promote and recruit for these meetings via flyers through community partners (i.e. churches, coalitions, practitioner’s offices, public health, etc.).
3. Create a Community Action Plan for African American families in south King and Pierce counties, informed by input from community events, with goals, specific actions and timelines.
“Miss Delores Baccus has shown exemplary leadership while facilitating difficult conversations about the intersections of being Black & female, motherhood, economics & how all of that impacts our health. We have been & are in crisis! Having the opportunity to learn & contribute with other concerned citizens has been insightful, cathartic & necessary. I’m very appreciative!” —Sheyla

Results

Three meetings were held at a local church, with approximately twenty community members attending each. Thirteen people attended all three of the meetings. Community members arrived engaged, ready to restart discussions from the previous meetings and continue working on completing the plan. The importance for community-based organization Mahogany Moms to remain the lead for this work and partnership, and that all documents created remain under community ownership. There was a true desire to talk about the topics, and to effect real change in their communities.

Following the second meeting, a Community Action Plan was drafted with the following needs identified:

> Widespread training on racism, bias, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), cultural humility, and equity for everyone working with African Americans
> Education on generational trauma
> Stop using African Americans as test subjects and emphasize patient autonomy
> Equitable pay/Compensation
> Stop tokenism— One person does not speak for a community or race of people
> Create Diversity Task Forces to enforce accountability

This Community Action Plan identifies changes that the African American community in King and Pierce counties need to achieve overall health and wellness in their communities. This work includes changes in many sectors: hospitals, law enforcement, legislation, education (youth and adult), state government, county government, hospital associations, WIC, breastfeeding, community services. These improvements will not only help African Americans but would also benefit other communities of color as well.

Sustaining Success

Community meetings will continue to be held quarterly. Future plans include the need to identify someone in each of the identified sectors to participate in the community meetings to help drive the necessary changes.

Contact Information

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1 Ihusen, Bower, Epstein & Sharps, 2016; Mutambudzi, Meyer, Reisine & Warren, 2017; Chambers, Erausquin, Tanner, Nichols & Brown-Jeffy, 2018
3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Infant Mortality Rates by Race and Ethnicity, 2016
4 Washington Department of Health, 2015

Continued Work

> Develop a way to share our processes with other communities to do this work
> Bring African American women to the table in the development of Washington State Hospital Association equity policy for birthing hospitals.
> Conduct physicians’ training/workshop on racism, equity and social justice with WA State Department of Health with funding from the Association of State and Territorial Health Officers.
> Prioritize policy and program changes needed for the included sectors.
> Work with Public Health, Seattle & King County, WA Department of Health and WIC on breastfeeding education activities.