

Born in May, little Zyaire Embry-Buckner is benefiting from the participation of his mother, Jaelynn Embry, in Healthy Start's programs to improve the health of mothers and their young children and to reduce poor birth outcomes.



The Heinz Endowments, other foundations and local government agencies in the Pittsburgh region are working on ways to decrease racial health disparities among mothers and their children that have persisted across decades – and the efforts offer hope. By Joyce Gannon

BRIDGING THE gap



While recent statistics from the Allegheny County Health Department revealed that infant mortality rates in the county have declined overall in recent years, Black babies in the county are two to three times more likely to die before their first birthdays than white infants.

“It’s a misconception that there has been forward motion or movement related to Black and brown mothers and babies,” said Margaret Larkins-Pettigrew, senior vice president and chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer and clinical strategist for Highmark Health and Allegheny Health Network (AHN). “Even though there’s been some decrease in the death of white babies, that’s not the case for Black babies. It’s just a myth.”

Of Allegheny County’s 1.24 million residents, approximately 13.5 percent are Black, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In January, county officials issued the 2022 Community Health Assessment report, which found that infant mortality overall fell in the years 2007 to 2019 from 7.5 deaths per 1,000, to 6.4 deaths per 1,000.

But during that period, infant mortality for Black babies was nearly five times as high as for white infants.



13/1000
2/1000

Pittsburgh's Gender Equity Commission issued a 2019 report that found that 13 of every 1,000 Black babies die before they turn 1 year old compared to fewer than two per 1,000 white babies.

97%

Also according to the commission report, the maternal mortality rate among Black women was higher in Pittsburgh than in 97 percent of similar cities.

THE HARD FACTS

Black maternal and child health challenges have reached alarming levels across the country, especially in the Pittsburgh region. Several local studies have presented data to support the need for action and for the programs that are trying to address the problems.

Racial bias — whether deliberate or unconscious — and barriers that prevent Black women and babies from receiving adequate health care are among the reasons high infant mortality rates persist, according to Dr. Larkins-Pettigrew and other experts.

Dannai Wilson, deputy director of community and family health for the Allegheny County Health Department, said disparities between Black and white women’s social determinants of health — such as income inequality, housing instability, chronic disease and life expectancy — create the racial gap.

“It’s all those things, from where we work and where we live to whether our communities are safe,” Ms. Wilson said. “Do women have access to a hospital and do [they] have access to a vehicle versus catching five buses?”

The county’s Community Health Assessment wasn’t the first study to show glaring racial gaps in maternal and child health in Pittsburgh.

A 2019 report from the City of Pittsburgh’s Gender Equity Commission found that 13 of every 1,000 Black babies die before they turn 1 year old compared with fewer than two per 1,000 white babies. That report also said the maternal mortality rate among Black women was higher in Pittsburgh than in 97 percent of similar cities.

“That was very hard to swallow in this community,” said Dr. Larkins-Pettigrew, who still sees patients weekly at her obstetrics-gynecology practice.

Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for Black women. Numerous studies showed Black individuals and families took a disproportionate hit from the coronavirus as they experienced higher death rates and hospitalizations and suffered greater economic stresses.



long with the Community Health Assessment data, the county in January published its Plan for a Healthier Allegheny 2023–27, which outlines steps for achieving more equitable outcomes for all county residents.

Among the goals that target maternal and child health are programs that promote breastfeeding for infants, increasing the number of infants who receive preventative health visits, and boosting participation in county programs like Hello Baby that provide resources for babies and families. For decades, The Heinz Endowments has been funding initiatives that support these objectives.

Hello Baby, in particular, connects families to home health visits, early childhood education programs and other services. In 2021, the Endowments granted \$800,000 to the county Department of Human Services for the program.

In addition, the Endowments that year granted \$350,000 to the county Health Department to identify racial inequity in birth outcomes. That grant led to the launch of several initiatives to support parents, including the Healthy Start Doula Program, which provides home visits by doulas — individuals trained to help women through pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum.

The grant to the Health Department also was used to launch a pilot project to integrate doulas into health care systems; fund a Fetal Infant Mortality Review partnership with Healthy Start to interview parents who experience a fetal loss or stillbirth; and provide money through nonprofit Footbridge to Families for parents who experience short-term emergency funding needs.

[The Allegheny County BIRTH Plan for Black Babies and Families]...outlines a comprehensive strategy intended to improve birth outcomes based on four key areas: strengthening the workforce in the maternal and children’s health field, strengthening the systems of care, addressing the social determinants of health, and coordinating and streamlining maternal and children’s health initiatives.



Jada Shirriel, chief executive officer of Healthy Start, a nonprofit in Pittsburgh's Point Breeze community with a mission to improve the health of mothers and young children and to reduce poor birth outcomes, said the reasons Black women and infants experience higher mortality rates are "very, very complex" because they are so closely linked to socioeconomic factors in the Black community.

"I don't have a silver bullet about what we need to do, or an exact solution," Ms. Shirriel said.

But she's confident that for families who receive visits from Healthy Start's doulas and benefit from supports including education about breastfeeding and baby formula, "the outcomes are better than for those not receiving our services."

Healthy Start, which has received more than \$500,000 in grants from the Endowments since 2020, also developed the Allegheny County BIRTH Plan for Black Babies and Families in partnership with the Allegheny County Maternal and Child Health Strategy Team. The plan outlines a comprehensive strategy intended to improve birth outcomes based on four key areas: strengthening the workforce in the maternal and children's health field, strengthening the systems of care, addressing the social determinants of health, and coordinating and streamlining maternal and children's health initiatives.

Denise O'Connor, executive director of Mid-Atlantic Mothers' Milk Bank, a nonprofit in Pittsburgh's Strip District neighborhood, said that breast milk — whether the milk comes directly from the baby's mother or is donated — gives medically fragile infants "the best start possible."

But babies of color "have less access to human milk," she said.

The Milk Bank is working on public policy initiatives that support breastfeeding, including state legislation to provide insurance coverage for medically prescribed donor milk for at-risk infants, and regulations to mandate workplaces to provide space for mothers to pump milk. The Endowments has provided grants totaling \$275,000 to the Milk Bank for staffing and public education programs.

Other funders in the Pittsburgh region also support efforts to find solutions to the range of issues affecting the health of mothers and their young children. Among those who, like the Endowments, have supported different programs and projects focusing on this issue are the Pittsburgh, Hillman Family, Richard King Mellon, Jewish Healthcare, Highmark and Staunton Farm foundations.

The Pittsburgh Foundation's funding to Healthy Start and other organizations that provide doulas and support to mothers of color aligns with its newly enacted strategic plan that includes eliminating health disparities that are "community centered," said Michael Yonas, the foundation's vice president of public health, research and learning.

At the Mid-Atlantic Mothers' Milk Bank, great care is taken to prepare and store donated breast milk for distribution to at-risk infants. In the top left photo, the milk is placed in containers before refrigeration. In the photo above, milk from five mothers is combined in a bucket to help ensure the distributed milk has enough of the proper nutrients.



Much of the Endowments' work to address maternal and infant health is guided by its Prenatal-to-3 initiative, which includes a set of resources and tools that serves as a playbook to achieve equitable support for all families with children — from pregnancy care to age 3. Since 2020, the Endowments has partnered with Child Trends, a nonpartisan research center in Bethesda, Maryland, to develop Prenatal-to-3, which includes input from child care experts and community members, data on state policies, and advocacy efforts for Medicaid coverage and family leave.

In fact, the Endowments' Prenatal-to-3 efforts have specific goals that include:

- Supporting collaboration across health, family support, and early care and education agencies and programs
- Supporting advocates seeking bold policy solutions
- Investing in tools and infrastructure that produce data to guide effective action steps
- Centering equity in programs, policies and advocacy work
- Leveraging federal and state funding
- Identifying and bringing to scale innovative programs

Carmen Anderson, Equity & Research vice president at the Endowments and interim Learning vice president, said Prenatal-to-3 is guiding the Endowments toward more “holistic” solutions for families.

“Yes, the mothers' health and access to high-quality medical care are critical components, but targeting health alone is not enough,” Ms. Anderson explained. “It's important to consider other important contributors to the well-being of mothers and infants, such as environmental factors, safe and secure housing, economic security, access to transportation, the cumulative impact of racism, and affordable, healthy food.”

At AHN, the Endowments is funding First Steps and Beyond, an initiative that attempts to reduce infant mortality and address “unconscious bias” among health care providers, Dr. Larkins-Pettigrew said. By coordinating the efforts of hospitals, federally qualified health centers, community organizations and pediatricians who deal with pregnant women and their families before and after they deliver, First Steps aims to “decrease the deaths of Black babies and all babies,” Dr. Larkins-Pettigrew said.

First Steps also includes education for parents on issues including postpartum depression, food security and infant sleep practices that can result in deaths. The Endowments in 2021 made an initial grant of \$250,000 to the program and in 2022 made a grant of \$600,000 over three years.

Dr. Larkins-Pettigrew was among the speakers on a February webinar organized by the Pittsburgh Business Group on Health (PBGH) to address unconscious bias in health care. PBGH, a nonprofit coalition of local employers, “is trying to figure out ways ... to best advocate for employees to ensure equitable outcomes” in health care, said Mike Stancil, president and chief executive officer of the organization.

Its webinar series is sponsored by the Highmark Foundation, and The Heinz Endowments is funding a PBGH project in which eight large employers in the Pittsburgh region are assessing workers' insurance claims and other information to determine if race makes a difference in access to doctors and medical services.

BOOTED RIGHT OUT

Dionna Rojas-Orta, 49, of Wilkinsburg, a professional life coach and community connections partnership coordinator at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, delivered her first child in 1993 when she was 19 years old.

She had plenty of support from her mother who accompanied her to medical appointments and helped care for her newborn daughter. But she felt marginalized because she was young and single and possibly because she was Black. Years later, giving birth to her second child, Ms. Rojas-Orta experienced what she felt was racial bias because she was a Black woman married to a Latino man.

Her son was jaundiced at birth, and though Ms. Rojas-Orta didn't feel well after the delivery, she was sent home after one night in the hospital. When she experienced tremors and her family rushed her to the hospital nearly a week later, she was told that her kidneys were failing.

“It hit me that they didn't take good care of me,” she said. “I was booted right out of the hospital.”

Because of her personal experience — and because outcomes for Black mothers in 2023 are not much better than they were in 1993 — Ms. Rojas-Orta is now a member of Brown Mamas, which helps Black women find community resources and support.



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Mike Stancil, president and CEO, Pittsburgh Business Group on Health

“Some people may live in care deserts without high-quality hospital care or maternity wards,” Mr. Stancil said. “Or maybe they don't live on a bus route or have a car. So their benefits are going unused. And that can have massive implications.”

The Endowments granted PBGH \$160,000 in 2021 and \$100,000 in 2022 for the health equity study. It has also funded organizations that support Black women and children beyond their medical needs.

One is Brown Mamas, a nonprofit that elevates collective Black mothering and provides positive socialization opportunities. The organization also connects Black women with community resources and provides meet-ups and events to help them feel less isolated. The Endowments granted Brown Mamas \$300,000 over the last two years. Muffy Mendoza founded the group in 2012 in her living room, and it's now based in Downtown Pittsburgh.

Black women are disproportionately affected by economic stresses such as child care costs and low-wage jobs, Ms. Mendoza said. While getting proper medical care is an underlying challenge, “I don't think Black women have time to think about it,” she said.

Group member LaShesia Holliday of Penn Hills delivered her first child at age 17—five weeks before her due date. As a teen and a Black single mother, she “felt like a number” when she arrived at the hospital.

In her last pregnancy nine years ago, Ms. Holliday, now 34, delivered twins, only one of whom survived. At one-and-a-half pounds, Taylor, a baby girl, underwent multiple surgeries and spent more than three months in a neonatal intensive care unit.

Taylor was also bald — a condition that helped motivate Ms. Holliday to launch Naptural Beauty Supply, a business that specializes in hair and skin products for Black women and girls. She's now thriving, said her mother, who this spring appeared at the annual Brown Mamas Monologues showcase in May to share her challenges — like overcoming racial biases in securing education opportunities for her children and fighting for financial support for them as a single Black mother.

She highlighted her entrepreneurial success.

“I told my story,” said Ms. Holliday. “After all the adversity and being a teenage mom and the whole stigma of that, I have a business.” **h**