

A close-up photograph of a newborn baby's head, held gently in the hands of an adult. The baby's eyes are closed, and its dark hair is visible. The hands are positioned around the baby's head, providing a sense of care and protection. The background is softly blurred, showing other parts of the baby's body and medical equipment like a white bandage on the forehead.

# HEAD START

Two-day-old Jeffrey Lavon Jenkins Jr. is precious treasure in the hands of his mother, Shaelyn Newton, at Pittsburgh's Magee Womens-Hospital of UPMC.

**T**he arrival of a new baby is always good news—perhaps particularly in Pittsburgh, where younger residents remain a highly prized cohort.

And there’s particularly encouraging news from the most recent study of newborn health in the region. As more pregnant mothers obtain prenatal care and are connected to other critical resources, Allegheny County’s infant mortality rate is falling. From 2008 to 2012, the rate of deaths per 1,000 births fell from 7.4 to 6.65 percent. Also, 97 percent of the county’s mothers today receive care during their pregnancies.

But a closer look at the statistics reveals that infant deaths remain stubbornly high in a handful of neighborhoods. Most troubling is the unyielding gap between rates for whites—4.1 per 1,000—and African Americans, whose infant mortality is nearly three times higher.

To lower the infant mortality rate for black families and to push the overall rate below 6 per 1,000—a goal of the county’s Healthy Allegheny agenda—two programs have been added this year to the portfolio of local initiatives to address the issue. Health care provider Allegheny Health Network expects to reach 6,000 women through workshops to increase awareness of environmental exposures in pregnancy and early childhood. The nonprofit Three Rivers Mothers’ Milk Bank is providing lifesaving breast milk to critically ill newborns. The Heinz Endowments has made two-year grants of \$100,000 to each program.

“Infant mortality prevention is critical in our work,” said Carmen Anderson, the Endowments’ senior program officer for Children, Youth & Families. “There’s a direct correlation with the milk bank: The baby lives. The environmental effort is not as easily connected to immediate results, but exposures can make a huge difference” in health. Umbilical cord blood studies have found, for example, that pregnant women are exposed to hundreds of toxins during pregnancy: pesticides, consumer product ingredients, and waste from burning coal, gasoline and garbage. So are their babies.

The Allegheny Health Network’s outreach programs for expectant mothers provided an opportunity to add the environmental message to a receptive audience. It also found an ideal partner in Women for a Healthy Environment, a local health education initiative.

“In all of our workshops, we provide practical solutions for the environment in which people live,” explained Michelle Naccarati-Chapkis, the initiative’s executive director. “If women only have access to a dollar store, we will provide information about the best options in that store setting. If participants have concerns about a particular [condition], like asthma, we provide one-on-one information.”

The nonprofit’s presentations on healthy lifestyles and healthy products, from warnings against baby shampoo containing formaldehyde to guidance in finding chlorine-free disposable diapers, reach mothers at an inflection point. “Pregnancy is a time when women are receptive to new ideas and changes and the consequences of choices,” Ms. Anderson said. The outreach program will follow up with nutritional advice as participants’ babies reach 3 months old.

The nutritional gold standard for newborns, of course, is breast milk. The Three Rivers Mothers’ Milk Bank extends the protections of breast milk to infants unable to nurse on their own. Like a blood bank, it collects, screens and pasteurizes donations, and distributes them at \$4.15 per ounce to neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) through the region.

The first month of life is critical. Nearly three-quarters of all infant deaths occur within the first 28 days. Targeting therapies to that time period is, therefore, a major step toward reducing mortality.

Human milk can prevent necrotizing enterocolitis, an infection and inflammation of the intestines that is one of the leading causes of

NICU deaths. But until the opening of the milk bank in January, the region lacked a way to supply breast milk to critically ill infants.

“Hospitals couldn’t have an informal program, because there are strict guidelines for screening,” explained Denise O’Connor, a lactation consultant who founded the milk bank. “It’s much more rigorous than nursing your own baby.”

The local milk bank joins 20 other such programs across the country, reaching babies at 15 health facilities in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. And with more than 85,000 ounces of milk collected to date, the milk bank has far exceeded its first-year goal of 50,000 ounces.

The generous volunteer response—more than 250 donors—has a strong intellectual and emotional core. Doctors and medical professionals have been among the first to step up. Ms. O’Connor said that’s to be expected because breastfeeding tracks education levels.

And about 5 percent of donors are bereaved mothers whose infants died in the NICU. They find solace in monthly support-group meetings at the milk bank’s local office. All nursing mothers are invited to informal “breastfeeding cafes” at the center each month.

“We thought this was a really important community resource that was missing for the region,” said Mary Phan-Gruber of the Jefferson Regional Foundation, which serves the South Hills region and made a \$25,000 grant to the milk bank. “It was a real partnership of doctors, lactation folks and others who’d been trying to pull it together for many years. It has excellent leadership. The timing was right.” **h**

**THE LATEST EFFORTS IN THE PITTSBURGH REGION TO REDUCE INFANT MORTALITY INVOLVE INCREASING ACCESS TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND LIFESAVING MOTHER’S MILK. BY CHRISTINE H. O’TOOLE**