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# Black baby deaths targeted

by Sarah Mishkin

TAMPA—Rochelle Barberio, a registered nurse with central Hillsborough Healthy Start, never knows what to expect when she opens the door.

Barberio makes house calls to at-risk expectant mothers, many of them African-American women struggling with medical, financial and social problems that complicate their pregnancies. Sometimes she'll find clients sitting in the dark, their electric bills unpaid. Or if they lack a support network in the area, they may suffer from depression.

Black infants in Florida die at rates four times that of White infants, and a bill signed into law Monday by Gov. Charlie Crist allocates \$1-million to studying why.

The odds for those infants are getting worse, says Estrellita Berry, project director for the central Hillsborough Healthy Start Project. In 2001, 17.6 black infants died per 1,000 live births in the Hillsborough area, Berry said.

In 2005, 22.7 per 1,000 died.

The state's Department of Health will administer the program and allocate the grant money to Healthy Start coalitions in counties with particularly high black infant mortality rates. The recipients will examine medical and social causes of infant death and help design future programs to improve survival rates.

But as Barberio's experience suggests, combating infant mortality means combating a litany of medical and social issues, each of them daunting. Obesity, high blood pressure, poor access to prenatal care, the stress of being a single mother—all contribute to pre-term labor, Berry said, which is one of the main causes of infant death.

Three of Berry's friends lost infants young—one from diabetes, one from high blood pressure, and one for reasons still unknown.

The bill bringing the \$1-million was sponsored by state Rep. Betty Reed, from east Tampa, and by Sen. Arthenia Joyner, whose district covers most of Tampa and St. Petersburg. Both are Democrats. Reed said the bill sailed through committee and was approved on by the House without debate.

Reed's concern for maternal and child health is nearly as old as she is. While she was still young, Reed's mother died in childbirth. Reed's oldest daughter gave birth to a stillborn child.

"Knowing that my mom had passed away some 50 years ago in childbirth, I don't think I ever got over it," she said. "When Gov. Crist signed the bill this morning, I felt as if a weight had been lifted. I always felt that her death was a health disparity, that maybe she didn't get the prenatal care she should have. With the signing of that bill today . . . I hope I started the process of really taking charge of the disparity."

This bill provides just a one-time grant of \$1-million for research. The next step, she said, will be designing a program to tackle a narrower issue related to infant mortality, such as access to prenatal care, and then finding the funding and partners necessary to start that program.

"If I had known that normally you don't get a million dollars, then I probably wouldn't have even thought about it," she said. "If you don't know what you shouldn't do, then you don't have any fear of doing it."

SOURCE: Sarah Mishkin, *St. Petersburg Times*, July 3, 2007, [http://www.sptimes.com/2007/07/03/Hillsborough/Black\\_baby\\_deaths\\_tar.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2007/07/03/Hillsborough/Black_baby_deaths_tar.shtml).



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