

# Celebrating One

## Overview

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**Every child deserves to celebrate his or her first birthday. Unfortunately, 150 infants in the Greater Columbus, Ohio area die every year before reaching their first year of life.**

Infant mortality—or the death of a child before their first birthday—is a key indicator of public health. While infant mortality rates are improving in the United States, high rates of infant deaths continue to plague the Columbus area. According to United Health Foundation’s *America’s Health Rankings*, Ohio ranks 42nd out of the 50 states for infant mortality. Using the same measure, the city of Columbus ranks 43rd out of the 50 largest U.S. cities with eight infant deaths occurring for every 1,000 live births. The problem is especially devastating for Columbus’ African American communities, with African American infants dying at a rate over two times that of Caucasian infants.



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# Infant Mortality and Women's Health in Columbus

The high infant mortality rate in Columbus reflects a number of preventable—yet persistent—factors, including premature births and unsafe sleeping surfaces. Nearly 11 percent of babies born in the city are born prematurely, more than 9 percent are born at a low birth weight and nearly 10 percent of infant deaths are sleep-related. More broadly, however, the persistent disparities in infant deaths are a result of social determinants, including inadequate access to transportation, health services, healthy and nutrient-rich food, safe housing and quality schools. In fact, infant deaths in the area are disproportionately concentrated in neighborhoods with lower levels of income, education and health. Eight communities—which represent less than a third of births in the area—have the highest rates of infant mortality in the city with 42 percent of infant deaths.

These social determinants are often difficult to address. The reality is a successful health intervention in one community may not translate to another, which means reducing infant mortality in Columbus requires a first-hand understanding of the specific needs and challenges facing each neighborhood. Those in the best position to understand these needs are the people who live in these communities. That's why CelebrateOne—an initiative created in 2015 as part of the Greater Columbus Infant Mortality Task Force—is training community members in target neighborhoods to address these urgent health needs. By taking an on-the-ground, resident-to-resident approach, the program is working to engage, empower, and educate new and expecting mothers in the eight Columbus neighborhoods with the highest rates of infant mortality.

## Helping Find Solutions for a Community in Crisis

Integral to CelebrateOne's efforts is the Community Connector Corps program, which trains community health workers (CHWs) in target neighborhoods to support new and expecting mothers and their families by connecting them with essential health and educational resources. Funded by a \$1.7 million grant from United Health Foundation, CelebrateOne has established the Community Connector Corps, which will train 72 CHWs to conduct outreach to women and families in high-priority Columbus neighborhoods. The corps of CHWs connect new and expecting mothers in their neighborhood to essential resources, raise awareness about safe sleep positions and educate families on healthy practices like breastfeeding, pre- and post-natal care and injury prevention methods.



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By recruiting residents who live in CelebrateOne's priority neighborhoods, the program is able to provide care that is tailored to the individual needs of Columbus' residents. Vanitia Turner is a great example of the impact this model can have in communities. As a Community Connector who has been living in Columbus for nearly her entire life, Vanitia is an active member of several local civic groups and has a deep and personal relationship with her community and neighbors. After experiencing the loss of a grandchild from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), she felt compelled to promote healthy practices for mothers and babies and give back to the community where she raised her family. Vanitia relied on the skills she learned in training to help ensure that women and their families are equipped with the resources and information they need for a child's healthy and safe first year of life. As a trusted member of the community, her work goes even further.

## VANITIA'S STORY

Vanitia knows all too well the critical public health issues facing mothers and babies within her community. A mother to six children and grandmother to 16 grandchildren, Vanitia was forced to confront the painful reality of losing a child too soon. In 2011, Kendalyn Rose Gore, Vanitia's granddaughter, passed away from SIDS while asleep at home.

This devastating loss inspired Vanitia to pursue a new career as a CHW with CelebrateOne's Community Connector Corps. In her role, Vanitia is helping reduce infant mortality in Columbus by engaging, educating, and empowering new and expectant mothers. Her efforts are grounded in her passion to ensure that other families don't have to go through what she and her family experienced. "I don't think any parent or grandparent should go through the death of a child when it's preventable," says Vanitia. "We want to see babies thrive in their first year and thereafter."

Vanitia plays a critical role in her community by connecting Columbus area mothers to essential health and social services, including prenatal care and education, easy-to-use cribs, transportation, and emergency food and housing. From providing diapers to mothers in need, delivering meals to hungry children, and cutting the umbilical cord as one of her clients gave birth, Vanitia covers the full spectrum of a baby's first year of care.



CHWs Vanitia Turner and Claudia Ruiz Lopez with Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther

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**VANITIA TURNER**  
Community Health Worker



*Vanitia Turner with her CelebrateOne CHW Cohort*

While working with a client who had recently relocated to the Columbus area without family nearby, Vanitia helped connect her to needed programs and services, including housing assistance when finances were tight. Their close relationship and constant communication gave her client a trusted confidant to rely on during her pregnancy. And, when her client went into labor, Vanitia was there in the hospital to provide support, encouragement and assistance.

To ensure babies are on the best path to a healthy and safe first year of life, CHWs educate families—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles—on best practices by providing them with critical information and resources. Changing habits and raising awareness about misconceptions on safe sleeping practices is one challenge Vanitia faces on a regular basis. To counter this, she teaches families the ABCs of safe sleep, ensuring all caretakers understand that babies are safest when they sleep alone, on their backs, and in an empty crib.

Vanitia describes all of this as a practice; it's something parents, grandparents and entire families have to work on to develop healthy routines. "I had to break my own habits, it's a process, and it's not going to happen overnight."

Vanitia's work within the community extends well beyond normal work hours. No matter where she goes—out to dinner with her husband or attending church on Sunday—Vanitia is constantly seeking out new and expectant mothers to ensure they have the tools and resources they need for a healthy and happy first year with their babies. "When I see expecting moms, I just start talking," noted Vanitia.

What began as a way to honor the loss of her granddaughter has turned into a passionate appeal to her community—an appeal to educate families, promote healthy outcomes and celebrate every birthday along the way.



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For more information, contact CelebrateOne at

 [www.celebrateone.info](http://www.celebrateone.info)