Local Organizations Join Together To Help Reduce The Number Of Black Child Deaths In Sacramento

Black children are dying at twice the rate of all other children in Sacramento County, and have been for the last 20 years, a fact that doesn’t sit well with community organizers. They’ve set a goal of reducing deaths, which experts say are largely preventable, by 10-20 percent by the year 2020. With the mission identified and resources allocated, stakeholders are rolling up their sleeves, ready to do the work. The Steering Committee on Reduction of African American Child Deaths (RAACD) has officially launched its county-wide initiative to reduce the number of Black children dying in Sacramento County. The launch, held at the Sierra Health Foundation last week, provided an opportunity for area organizations that have been selected to implement social services and education efforts to share how they’ll be reaching out to the communities they serve.

Sierra Health Foundation President and CEO and RAACD co-chair Chet Hewitt says collaborating and empowering with such partners, that have “real and authentic connections” to those communities, presents opportunities for progress. Last week’s launch gave Jairon Jackson and Jeff Champ the chance to do some team building activities.

Working with the Mutual Assistance Network, Heather Gonzalez, Rev. Joy Johnson and Danielle Lawrence will work to hold a mirror up to what’s going on in the Arden Arcade area and be a part of the solution.

Sierra Health Foundation President and CEO Chet Hewitt says members of the community have a moral and social imperative to do all they can to address the issue of Black child deaths.

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The best chance for success is when systems doing something for the community or to their community. This is about organizing the community to take the charge itself and to provide the kind of leadership that I think is required if real change is truly going to happen, Hewitt said.

New RAACD co-chair, Dr. Natalie Woods Andrews agrees. “It’s time to step up in our communities,” Dr. Woods Andrews said. “We can no longer work in isolation.” The organizations, dubbed Community Lead Incubators, are located in the seven focus areas identified as where the most of the disproportionate deaths occur: Mutual Assistance Network/Arden Arcade Community Center in Arden Arcade; Sacramento Building Healthy Communities HUB in the Fruitridge/Ridgewood Boulevard area; Roberts Family Development Center in North Sacramento/Del Paso Heights; Liberty Towers Church of the Nazarene in North Highlands/Football Farm; and Sacramento Christian Community Center in the Valley Hi area. Organizations working in the Oak Park and Meadowview areas will be announced later this summer.

South Sacramento Christian Center has always had an interest in saving lives. With the knowledge that our African American babies are dying, we can no longer sit back without taking direct action,” Ms. Simmons shared. “As a faith-based organization we believe it is our duty to be at the forefront and partner to lead the change and invest in our future generations,” she added.

The RAACD identified four leading causes of Black infant deaths in Sacramento County: infant sleep-related deaths, perinatal conditions, child abuse and neglect homicides and third-party homicide. Data, Ms. Simmons says, shows that perinatal and infant sleep-related deaths are the highest in the Valley Hi community. Sierra Health Foundation recently honored two members of the Blue Ribbon Commission, Dr. Ethan Cutts and Diane Galati, who got the institutions they work for — Kaiser Permanente and Dignity Health — to conduct sleep assessments for all families of newborns. If they didn’t have safe sleep environments at home, they are provided with free cribs and playpens. UC Davis Medical Center and Sutter Health have also joined in.

“Our started out with Black children, we got people committed, motivated and activated a policy change has been made as a private space, private non-profit, this wasn’t a public law or regulation, that is now changing the experience of all children who are born in this entire region, that’s the power of this particular work, when you activate and connect institutions and people across the community with a common purpose and a common charge,” Hewitt said, adding that Dr. Cutts and Ms. Galati’s actions are examples of “what’s possible.” Leaders will also have to address tough community issues, such as housing, jobs, food and safety, that — while not directly related to the RAACD’s agenda — will ultimately enhance the overall goals.

For its work, the community-driven RAACD has secured $8.1 million from the County and City of Sacramento to use over the next five years. Additional funding will come from the County’s First 5 Commission and its child welfare and probation departments.

Many of the organizations and team members, Ms. Simmons said, have been doing the work for years, but lacked resources. Hewitt and Dr. Woods Andrews both admit the initiative won’t solve all ills, but call it a beginning.

“Change isn’t going to happen overnight, but the fact that we have a steering committee focused on the reduction of African American child deaths, to me, that makes a big statement here in Sacramento County,” Dr. Woods Andrews shared. “Failure is not an option,” she continued.

Lasanya Brief, Wendy Polko and Jacqueline Duncan were among the participants.

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