

Empty Cradles | Confronting Our Infant Mortality Crisis

## BMO Harris to donate \$750,000 to fight infant mortality

By [Crocker Stephenson](#) of the Journal Sentinel  
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BMO Harris Bank will donate \$750,000 over the next three years to the United Way of Greater Milwaukee, which will use the money to help babies born in Milwaukee survive their first year of life.

"Everyone we talk to - all our neighbors and friends and business associates agree - there is no issue more important than infant mortality," said Brad Chapin, the company's executive vice president of personal banking.

Milwaukee's infant mortality rate is among the highest of the nation's largest cities, a situation Chapin called unacceptable.

"That is not how we want to be defined in Milwaukee," he said.

In 2011, the Journal Sentinel explored the causes of the city's chronic infant mortality problem and how other communities are making progress in its "Empty Cradles" series. Last November, the Helen Bader Foundation cited that reporting in [announcing a \\$75,000 grant](#) to the United Way to combat infant mortality.

Much of the BMO Harris contribution, which is to be announced at a news conference Monday morning, will be used by the United Way to expand the agency's Healthy Birth Initiative, said Mary Lou Young, United Way's president and CEO.

Mayor Tom Barrett, who last year pledged to reduce the city's black infant mortality rate by 15% and its overall rate by 10% by 2017, will serve as chairman of the initiative.

"We have to tackle this," Barrett said in an interview.

The United Way will award a chunk of the donation - \$50,000 a year for three years - to Progressive Community Health Centers for its obstetrics program.

The grant will enable Progressive to hire a full-time registered nurse who would dedicate his or her time to women's health and assist in care of its prenatal patients, said Progressive's CEO, Jenni Sevenich.

### Serving the neighborhood

Progressive is a nonprofit health agency in the 1400 block of N. 7th St. and the 3500 block of W. Lisbon

Ave., neighborhoods with exceptionally high rates of infant mortality.

About 90% of Progressive's prenatal patients are black, significant in a city in which African-American babies die at a rate about three times greater than white babies.

Roughly a quarter of those patients are under 19 and more than 70% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

Progressive provided services to 255 patients in 2011 and delivered 123 babies, Sevenich said.

Usually, donations to the United Way are distributed to organizations that run programs - the Cathedral Center, for example, which provides emergency shelter to women and families.

The bulk of the BMO Harris donation, however, will be used by the United Way itself to hire a project director and to spearhead a coordinated response to the city's infant mortality crisis.

The program, modeled after the agency's successful Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative, will work with and through community partners, corporate leaders and health care providers, the United Way's Young said.

In its "Empty Cradles" series, the Journal Sentinel reported that Milwaukee has more than 110 infant mortality programs run by nonprofit agencies. However, many of those agencies compete for the same limited grant dollars, creating an inefficient and fragmented system.

The Lifecourse Initiative for Healthy Families, launched in Milwaukee, Beloit, Kenosha and Racine by the Wisconsin Partnership Program and the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, was to help unify those disparate efforts.

The Milwaukee chapter announced its three-pronged action plan in April. It focuses on what public health experts consider some of the social and economic causes of infant death, particularly in the African-American community: absent or uninvolved fathers, poverty and lack of access to health care.

Young said members of Milwaukee's Lifecourse will be involved in the United Way's initiative, but that the United Way would attack the more immediate causes of infant death.

"We sometimes look too broadly," Young said. "We have to save babies in real time."

Barrett called the United Way approach and the Lifecourse approach complementary.

"There are so many ways to address these issues," he said. "We don't want to foreclose on any of them."

Young said the BMO Harris contribution is "an example of how corporate leaders can change the health of our community."

Said Young: "We invite others to join us."

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