**Infant Mortality in the African American Community**

September 15, 2008

African American mothers are twice as likely as their non African American counterparts to lose a baby in infancy, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov). This startling disparity has left researchers scrambling for answers and ways to close the gap. One suggestion, emerging from USC's [Center for Premature Health Infant Health and Development](https://www.usc.edu), is that African Americans, more than any other group, have a significant amount of accumulated life long stress, which impacts their general health and the health of their infants.

Last year, First 5 LA did a story on one woman's journey to combat "historical stress." She established the [Pasadena Birthing Project](https://www.pasadenabirthing.org), a Community Partners project that pairs black women mentors with a pregnant mentee to create a supportive bond. In honor of Infant Mortality Awareness Month, we are drawing attention to this special program again by highlighting the story below.

Also, if you would like to find out more about infant mortality in the African American community, the Pasadena Birthing Project and several other community partners including USC and the March of Dimes, will be hosting a community forum on November 5, 2008 at the California Endowment. The event, *Is Society to Blame?*, will have a screening of *When the Bough Breaks*, part of the PBS special series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?*, followed by a panel including one of the doctors featured in the film. [Click here](https://www.first5la.org) to download the flier.

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**Birthing Project Matches Women to Reduce Preterm Birth**

May 14, 2007

If you’ve ever been pregnant, you know the importance of having a reliable support system. Having someone help you through the stress of pregnancy can be crucial for the health of mother and child. But because not all women have that special someone, organizations like the Pasadena Birthing Project step in.

A local chapter of Birthing Project USA, the Pasadena project was founded in 1994 to support local pregnant women, specifically in the African American community, which has the highest rate of preterm births compared to other groups.

Utilizing the black community's wise woman or "big mamma" concept, the Project pairs trained volunteer mentors called "sister friends" with pregnant women of any age to provide a cross section of personal and professional assistance, including health care education, social service referral and advocacy.

"Sister friends are like extended family members with a special toolkit of important knowledge," says Wenonah Valentine, executive director of the local Pasadena chapter. Valentine trains each "sister friend" in health literacy, community leadership, and active engagement.

Susie Dixon, a sister friend with the Project since 1997 has mentored three women. "I loved these girls like they were my family," says Dixon, now Godmother to her last mentee's set of twins. Dixon, 62 and a small business owner, helped her first mentee cope with an abusive relationship with her babies' father and helped her last through a series of medical complications, including the babies' low birth weight.

The numbers speak to the need for such support. In L.A. County, almost 15 percent of African American babies are preterm - three percent more than the average. Moreover, "the rate of preterm births among this community is two to three times higher than the national statistic," says Dr. Jack Turman, Jr. founder of the Center for Premature Infant Health and Development at the USC Keck School of Medicine.
Valentine has partnered with Dr. Turman to be sure that all mentors have up-to-date knowledge on how to help their mentee's avoid preterm birth.

To learn more about the Pasadena Birthing Project visit pasadenabirthingproject.org or call Wenonah Valentine at (323) 732-1350. To learn more about the USC Center for Premature Infant Health and Development, visit www.usc.edu/igm/cpihd or call Dr. Jack Turman at (323) 442-2947.

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