



Testimony of First Year Cleveland
The Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Committee
October 4, 2023

Chair Edwards, Vice-chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, members of the Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of First Year Cleveland.

My name is Angela Newman-White, and I am the Executive Director of First Year Cleveland. I have worked in maternal and infant health for two decades. Founded in 2015, First Year Cleveland was created in response to the record high infant mortality rate of 18.5 for black infants as compared to a rate of 5.5 for white infants. Even with high quality healthcare systems and numerous programs and interventions, it was clear that more support was needed to coordinate existing services, build capacity for programs that are impactful, invest in community driven strategies designed by families with lived experience, and advocate for policy and system changes that mitigate the risk factors associated with infant death.

First Year Cleveland's mission is to mobilize the community through partnerships and a unified strategy to reduce infant deaths and racial disparities to fulfill its vision that every baby born in Cuyahoga County will celebrate a first birthday.

On behalf of our partners and the families we serve, I would like to say thank you to Governor DeWine, his administration, and the legislature for the continued support for families to thrive.

Since 2015, we have worked in partnership with the Ohio Dept of Health, Dept of Medicaid, and local community programs such as the Ohio Equity Institute, Birthing Beautiful Communities, MomsFirst, Help Me Grow, Moms and Babies First, and Nurse Family Partnership to address gaps in services and identify system change needs that improve quality and access to care. Though we have seen an improvement in infant mortality since 2015, the racial inequities persist. With a healthy people 2030 goal of 5.0, Black families experienced a preliminary 2022 infant mortality rate of 13.03 compared to a rate of 3.99 for White families.

With less than 34% of the total births in Cuyahoga County in 2022, Black families suffered 64% of infant deaths that year. This significant black to white disparity gap in infant mortality is the reason we must apply an equity lens to our approach to eliminate it, focusing on the communities and populations of greatest need. If racial equity had been achieved between 2013-2022, 569 more black babies would have celebrated their first birthdays.

The leading contributing factor for infant death and many other adverse outcomes continues to be poverty. Economic challenges impact access to safe and quality housing, education, healthy food, transportation, and healthcare. With costs rising and wages remaining stagnant, it is difficult to secure safe and stable housing. In many households in the City of Cleveland, rent accounts for more than 45% of the household income, limiting resources for day to day living.

Your support for the Healthy Beginnings at Home program will allow more families to secure safe and stable housing which will lead to better outcomes for families and the communities where they reside. Your support for expansion of the Help Me Grow program and other supportive programs will increase the number of families who receive health education, referrals, and other forms of social support.

Investment in early childhood education will be significant for childhood health and educational outcomes. Not only are families in need of early childhood education but there is also a need for high quality, affordable childcare for infants and toddlers to get back to work or school. There has been a 40% reduction in childcare slots stemming from shortage of childcare providers. Increasing the capacity of the childcare workforce is essential to ensure families can achieve optimal outcomes. Most low-income families do not have access to paid leave and are forced to return to work as soon as 3 weeks post-partum when they have support to retain employment.

The Strong Foundations Act (HB 7) will make early investments that lay the foundation for good outcomes. The first 1,000 days are a time of tremendous potential and enormous vulnerability as children's brains are rapidly growing, building the opportunity for their lifelong health. How well or how poorly mothers and children are supported during this time has a profound impact on a child's ability to grow, learn, and thrive.

There is immense opportunity to advance policy solutions through the Strong Foundations Act that will promote maternal and infant health, create a stronger foundation of supports for pregnant women and new parents and build a stronger Ohio. Thank you for your time today. With your support, we can better ensure first birthdays and healthy moms for every family in Cuyahoga County.