

Testimony of First Year Cleveland
The Ohio House of Representatives
Finance Committee
March 14, 2023

Chair Carruthers, Ranking Member Liston, Representative Hoops, McNally, and Schmidt, 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, serving as a case manager and administrator at the Cleveland Department of Health's MomsFirst program and as a grant supervisor at the Cuyahoga County Board of Health. 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 still 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.

Put another striking way, for the last ten years, Cuyahoga County has had 27 fewer kindergarten classrooms because of the inequities in birth outcomes experienced by Black families. Those inequities are caused by a lack of fairness and justice which translate into unequal opportunities to thrive.

The leading contributing factor for infant death and many other adverse outcomes continues to be poverty and the cost of housing. 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 will increase the number of families who receive health education, referrals, and other forms of social support.

The investment in early childhood education will be significant for childhood health and educational outcomes. Many of the licensed centers in Cuyahoga County are Ohio Healthy Program designated, increasing young children's exposure to nutrition and physical activity. 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. 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.

Investments in initiatives that support youth who are at risk of entering foster care or needing a permanent home are vital. In many instances, parents don't have the necessary support to provide for their children which can lead to various adverse childhood experiences associated with long term mental and physical health implications. As an Advisory Board member for the Cuyahoga County Dept of Children and Family Services, I understand the challenges that the agency faces when trying to care for kids in custody with limited resources and lacking much needed collaborative approaches across systems to serve our children with complex needs.

Your support for these valued interventions will provide many families the opportunity to receive high quality services that will lead to better outcomes. It is important to remember that creating conditions for families to thrive will lead to the best possible outcomes for our communities.

While a focus on policy and systems changes has served us well, place-based work emphasizing social and environmental risk factors will have a tremendous impact for individual communities.

Working alongside communities and establishing shared power in the development and implementation of community driven strategies creates an opportunity to build trust, shift power, and create sustainable change.

Thank you for your time today. With your support, we can better ensure first birthdays and healthy moms for every family in Cuyahoga County.