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**Ohio House Health Committee  
House Bill 96  
Groundwork Ohio  
March 5, 2025**

***Interested Party Testimony in Support of the Ohio Department of Health Budget  
Supporting Maternal, Infant, and Young Child Health***

Chairwoman Schmidt, Vice Chair Deeter, Ranking Member Somani and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today in support of the Ohio Department of Health's (ODH) requested investments to promote positive health outcomes for Ohio's mothers, infants, and youngest children. My name is Caitlin Feldman and I am the Policy Director with Groundwork Ohio. We are the state's leading early childhood advocacy organization focused on the healthy development of young children and their families.

**Ohio's Infant Mortality Crisis**

Ohio is facing severe infant and maternal mortality crisis, ranking Ohio 30<sup>th</sup> among all 50 states and D.C. for infant mortality.<sup>1</sup> This abysmal statistic has made limited improvement over the past decade. Most recent data shows Ohio's overall infant mortality rate was 7.1 deaths per 1,000 births, with a Black infant mortality rate of 13.4 per 1,000 (more than twice the rate for white infants).<sup>2</sup> Multifaceted challenges require multifaceted solutions. We are alarmed by our state's performance and are supportive of many initiatives included in ODH's budget that can meaningfully reduce infant and maternal mortality.

**Women, Infants, and Children (WIC): An Important Vehicle to Promote Access to Nutritious Foods**

Ohio's WIC program is a vehicle to connecting families to nutritious foods and nutrition education for pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women. Mothers


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<sup>1</sup> : Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Wide-ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER) (2022).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

who participate in WIC are more likely to give birth to healthy babies, lowering the risk of infant mortality by as much as 37%.<sup>3</sup>

Families are working hard to raise their children well and give them every possible advantage, but rising costs of food are severing opportunities to make healthy choices. WIC is a key solution to help ensure nutritious foods are accessible for low-income families. Yet, among young children who were eligible for WIC benefits between 2019-2021, the percentage of children and families that received them decreased by over 20%.<sup>4</sup> This is largely driven by barriers to accessing the program. Ohio is one of just nine states without an online WIC renewal system, and the Ohio Department of Health's initiative to increase investment in WIC modernizing technology can be an important way to reach more families in need.

 Ohio's performance			
	Baseline	Most Recent	Trend
Basic Needs			
<b>Eligible for and receiving WIC, Overall.</b> Percent of women, infants, and children, who were eligible for WIC and received WIC benefits	46.2% (2019)	38.9% (2021)	Worsened
<b>Eligible for and receiving WIC, Infants.</b> Percent of infants, who were eligible for WIC and received WIC benefits	N/A	80.9% (2021)	N/A
<b>Eligible for and receiving WIC, Pregnant or Postpartum Women.</b> Percent of pregnant or postpartum women, who were eligible for WIC and received WIC benefits	N/A	45.7% (2021)	N/A
<b>Eligible for and receiving WIC, Young Children.</b> Percent of children, ages 1-4, who were eligible for WIC and received WIC benefits	34.2% (2019)	27.1% (2021)	Greatly Worsened

Source: Groundwork Ohio. (2025). Early Childhood Data Dashboard.

[https://www.groundworkohio.org/files/ugd/a395ee\\_03eae070a8f46b7af018364f183ba4a.pdf](https://www.groundworkohio.org/files/ugd/a395ee_03eae070a8f46b7af018364f183ba4a.pdf)

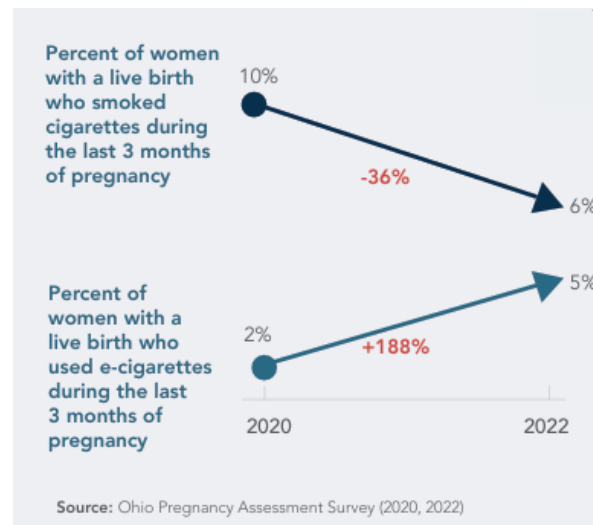
## Tobacco Cessation for Pregnant Moms

We are pleased to see a call for increased investment to support smoking cessation programming, especially for women in communities with the highest infant mortality rates. Smoking cigarettes while pregnant has been associated with a range of adverse health outcomes, such as birth defects and prematurity, and has been linked to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and infant mortality.

<sup>3</sup> Carlson, S., & Neuberger, Z. (2021). WIC works: addressing the nutrition and health needs of Low-income families for more than four decades. <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/wic-works-addressing-the-nutrition-and-health-needs-of-low-income-families>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, WIC Eligibility and Coverage Rates.

While the number of Ohio women who smoked cigarettes during the last three months of their pregnancy declined from 2020 to 2022, that decline has been offset by a tripling of the use of e-cigarettes.<sup>5</sup> E-cigarettes pose similar health hazards as regular cigarettes, linked to asthma, organ damage, cancer, and infant mortality.<sup>6</sup> Prioritizing investment in smoking cessation programming, particularly for moms in high infant mortality risk areas, is a mechanism to save lives.



### **Mobile Dental Units to Strengthen Oral Health in Underserved Communities**

About 4 in 10 pregnant women—and an even higher percentage of expecting Black women—experience dental issues that increase the risk of pregnancy or birthing complications, such as preterm birth, low birthweight, preeclampsia, and gestational diabetes.<sup>7</sup> As with many other health outcomes, the dental health status of the parent is closely linked with that of the child, where children whose parents have poor oral health are more likely to have poor oral health themselves. Good oral health from pregnancy through early childhood is critical to prevent painful infections and ensure healthy development of permanent teeth.<sup>8</sup>

Many employer sponsored health plans do not include dental coverage, leaving families unable to access preventive dental care due to financial barriers. Despite Medicaid remaining the main source of dental coverage for children from low-income families, accessibility remains a challenge, especially in rural and Appalachian regions

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<sup>5</sup> National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. (2018). Public health consequences of e-cigarettes. The National Academies Press, Washington, D.C.

<sup>6</sup> Health effects of vaping. (2024). Smoking and Tobacco Use.

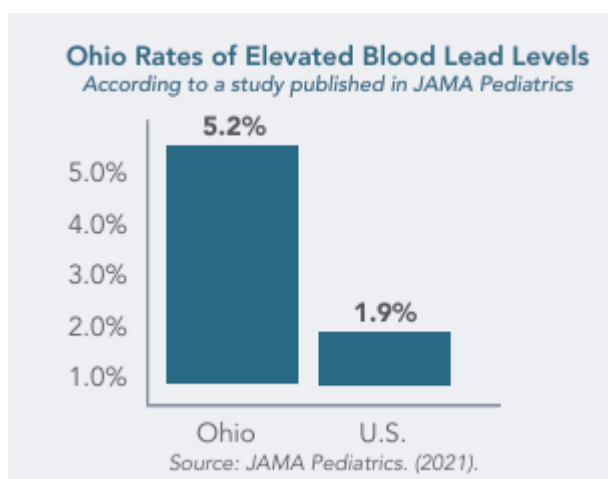
<sup>7</sup> CareQuest Institute for Oral Health. (2023). Addressing the Role of Oral Health in Maternal Mortality and Pregnancy Outcomes. Boston, MA.

<sup>8</sup> Health Resources and Services Administration. (n.d.). *Oral health and pregnancy*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://mchb.hrsa.gov>

of our state where licensed dentists can be sparse or completely absent.<sup>9</sup> Mobile dental units are an important way to bolster solutions for the communities most harmed by dental professional shortages, bringing needed services directly to the community.

### **Lead Abatement: A Key Strategy for Improving Health Outcomes over Time**

Lead-based paint is estimated to be present in as many as two-thirds of Ohio's homes built before 1978. Young children are especially susceptible to the harmful effects of lead and early exposure can harm the growing brain, delaying growth and development, and may cause learning, behavior, speech, and other health problems as a child ages.<sup>10</sup> There is no safe blood lead level, and Ohio has nearly double the national rate of children with elevated blood lead levels.



Mitigation of lead in older homes can be cost prohibitive, especially for families with young children whose expenses tend to be higher than those of families with older children. By increasing the lead abatement tax credit, more families will have access to the funds they need to eliminate the harm of lead from their homes, giving families peace of mind and improving child development outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

The first years of life are the most foundational years for a child's development. Investments in early childhood not only benefit the well-being of children and their families, but they pay dividends to the state and our economy. Ohio families are strong, but our systems require support to meet demands.

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<sup>9</sup> Safety Net Dental Clinics. (2024). *Safety Net Dental Clinics and Dental HPSAs\* in Ohio*. [https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/ff48e78d-6bb5-4d87-83f2-1974c240b995/Safety+Net+and+HPSA+Map+8\\_2024.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CONVERT\\_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18\\_JQGCH4S04P41206HNUKVF31000-ff48e78d-6bb5-4d87-83f2-1974c240b995-pamr9rN](https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/ff48e78d-6bb5-4d87-83f2-1974c240b995/Safety+Net+and+HPSA+Map+8_2024.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CONVERT_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18_JQGCH4S04P41206HNUKVF31000-ff48e78d-6bb5-4d87-83f2-1974c240b995-pamr9rN)

<sup>10</sup> Lead exposure symptoms and complications. (2024). Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention.

Groundwork Ohio strongly supports funding for the Ohio Department of Health's (ODH) initiatives aiming to improve health outcomes for moms and babies. Far too many babies born in our state do not live to see their first birthday, and too many families are impacted by the devastating grief that accompanies the loss of a young child. The investments requested by the Ohio Department of Health offer multifaceted solutions that can collectively improve maternal health, pregnancy and birth outcomes, and set a strong foundation for Ohio's youngest children. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have at this time.