



7/24/1996

**NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.**

For Immediate Release

(Editors: This is one of a series of op-ed pieces from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research. The Center is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to informing the public and making state government more effective and accountable. In a 1995 edition of *North Carolina Insight*, the Center published research on issues affecting the health of minority citizens in North Carolina. This editorial is based on that research. For more information, contact Mike McLaughlin at the Center at (919) 832-2839.)

**State Senate Should Restore Expansion Funding for Maternal Outreach Worker Program,
House Should Agree**

by Mike McLaughlin

When the N.C. Senate left town on June 21 after failing to reach an expansion budget agreement with the N.C. House of Representatives, there was a diamond hidden in the heap of dollars that constituted its 1996-97 spending plan. That diamond was \$1 million in additional funding for the state's maternal outreach worker program. When the Senate reconvened July 8 and passed a new spending plan, the \$1 million was left out. The money was never in the House spending plan to begin with. That's a pity, and here's why.

Maternal outreach workers are employed by local health departments to work with mothers of children who are at risk of abuse or neglect. Maternal outreach workers currently stay with these mothers until children reach age 1, giving the mothers companionship, advice, and a helping hand in the care and nurturing of children.

The idea is that these workers -- through home visits -- will help reduce the state's egregiously high infant mortality rate, defined as any infant death occurring before age 1. North Carolina currently ranks 48th in the nation in its infant mortality rate -- and the rate for non-white infants (15.0 deaths per 1,000 live births) is more than twice as high as that of whites (6.8 per 1,000 live births). Yet maternal outreach workers are thought to be making a difference. Such a difference, in fact, that three North Carolina lawmakers -- Sens. Charlie Dannelly and Leslie Winner (both D-Mecklenburg) and Sen. William Martin (D-Guilford) -- proposed expanding the program to allow these workers to stay with their families until the children reached age 3. The N.C. Senate initially went along with this proposal to the tune of \$1 million, and rightfully so.

The idea is to see if maternal outreach workers can be equally effective in preventing the abuse and neglect of toddlers, two leading causes of death for children of this age group. The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research believes expanding the program is a sound idea and a wise use of public funds.

Last year, the Center recommended a \$550,000 expansion of the maternal outreach worker program after a thorough study of issues affecting the health of minority citizens in North

Carolina -- a study that found minorities -- particularly African-Americans -- to be at far greater risk of disease, injury, and death than the white majority. *The maternal outreach worker program is not limited to minorities*; instead, it is targeted to low-income families. However, since minorities are, on the whole, poorer than whites, more minorities would benefit from the program.

In addition, researchers have cited inadequate birth spacing as a major contributor to North Carolina's infant mortality rate, which is more than twice as high for African-Americans as for whites. Maternal outreach workers can encourage mothers to delay subsequent pregnancies, thus having an impact on the state's infant mortality rate. Minority children ages 1-3 also suffer disproportionately from abuse, neglect, and accidents, so the help is direly needed. State government's Child Fatality Task Force recognized this need when it recommended that the legislature expand the program in its 1996 report. In doing so, the task force was picking up on a recommendation from the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, which labeled implementation of home-visit services such as the N.C. maternal outreach worker program as "the most critical first step in preventing child abuse and neglect."

Anyone who has read or heard of the death of a child due to abuse or neglect does not need the details recounted here. For most of us, those details are too horrible to contemplate: cigarette burns; beatings that cause deep bruises and break tiny bones; shakings so brutal they cause the brain to hemorrhage. And even when neglect produces no immediate health impact, there are long-term implications of inadequate attention to children.

Maternal outreach workers give low-income mothers support, advice, and a helping hand to assure that children receive the attention they need through age 1, but the program leaves a gap. The Center believes that helping hand should be extended to age 3. The cost would be roughly 15 cents per Tar Heel resident, and most of us can spare that change.

The Senate budget conferees should put the maternal outreach worker program back on its list of "must haves" for the 1996 session. For that matter, the House could as easily add the program to its list. But at this stage of the game, it wouldn't hurt if lawmakers in both houses and both parties of the legislature had a little encouragement from their constituents. We North Carolinians need to speak up for our children and let our lawmakers know how important maternal outreach workers are in assuring a healthy start for toddlers.

A good place for citizens to start would be the office of N.C. House of Representatives Speaker Harold Brubaker and Senate President Pro Tempore Marc Basnight. So call, fax, or write these lawmakers and let them know there should be a place in the budget for the maternal outreach worker program. Contact Harold Brubaker, Speaker of the House, 2304 Legislative Building, 16 West Jones St., Raleigh, N.C. 27601-2808; phone: (919) 733-3451 (voice) or (919) 715-0772 (fax). Contact Sen. Marc Basnight, President Pro Tem, N.C. Senate, 2007 Legislative Building, 16 West Jones St., Raleigh, N.C., 27601-2808; phone: (919) 733-6854 (voice) or (919) 733-8740 (fax).

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