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Engaging Fathers and Male Caregivers in Safe Sleep Practices

Unsafe sleeping is the leading cause of preventable infant death in Los Angeles County, with a baby dying of unsafe sleeping conditions nearly every week. Recent CDC data demonstrates persistent racial and ethnic disparities in sleep-related infant deaths nationwide. In 2022, non-Hispanic Black infants died from sudden unexpected infant death (SUID) at more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic White infants, while American Indian and Alaska Native infants experienced the highest rates overall. These deaths, many linked to unsafe sleep environments, remain largely preventable through evidence-based safe sleep education and intervention strategies. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, infants who sleep with adults are two to ten times more likely to die than those who sleep alone in a crib, depending on their specific risk factors¹. In Los Angeles County, there are more sleep related deaths than all other accidental child deaths combined. These tragedies are largely preventable when parents and caregivers have access to accurate information, resources, and support.

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-11-18/why-advice-about-infant-co-sleeping-changing-despite-sids-risk>

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The County's Infant Safe Sleep Campaign, led by the Inter-Agency Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (ICAN) and the Department of Public Health (DPH), and First 5 Los Angeles, focuses on prevention efforts. ICAN data indicates that when information on safe sleep practices is provided, unsafe sleep fatalities decrease as new parents have the tools they need to make informed choices. Safe Sleep campaign materials state that "approximately 70 infants die from unsafe sleep-related deaths in Los Angeles County each year," which equates to roughly one baby every five days. This campaign has generally focused on targeting new mothers.

In addition to the County-wide Safe Sleep campaign, this Board has taken several actions over the last few years to better support families and promote safe sleep. Through a partnership with the Departments of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and Health Services, the County launched a program to give cribs to babies born at County hospitals without a safe place to sleep at home. The County has also supported the expansion of DCFS' Young Children in Care (YCIC) unit, which is designed to strengthen emerging practices and policy guidelines around engaging, assessing, and servicing newborns, infants, toddlers and preschoolers (ages birth to five) and their caregiver(s). But we can and must do more to better support these babies and their families.

Over the last several years, both DCFS and DPH have launched initiatives and engagement programs focused on better supporting and educating fathers. DCFS's Cultural Brokers program includes the Strong Foundations: The Black Fatherhood Legacy Initiative, which is specifically focused on supporting those parenting children aged 0-5. This program, which is currently only available at two DCFS offices, allows fathers to receive education and support from a trusted community member, creating opportunities

for them to learn how to better engage with and support their young child without fear of judgement. DPH's African American Infant and Maternal Mortality (AAIMM) Prevention Initiative has launched two programs, Black Daddy Dialogue and the Expecting Fathers Group for Black Dads, specifically focused on engaging fathers, both of which are led by and for Black fathers. Los Angeles County's African American Infant and Maternal Mortality (AAIMM) Prevention Initiative, represents an important investment in father-centered support aimed at reducing disparities in infant mortality and improving health outcomes for Black families. Recent peer-reviewed research demonstrates that fathers play a critical role in infant safe sleep practices, yet significant gaps remain in adherence to evidence-based recommendations. A 2023 study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that while nearly all fathers reported putting their infants to sleep, only 16% reported following three of the safe sleep guidelines (putting baby on back to sleep, using an approved sleep surface like a crib or bassinet, and avoiding all soft bedding including pillows and blankets) recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, with just 32% using an approved sleep surface². The study also identified disparities among Black fathers, who reported lower rates of back sleeping and avoiding soft bedding, underscoring the importance of culturally responsive outreach and trusted community-based engagement strategies.

Through these initiatives, the County has existing pathways for engaging fathers and father figures, and they present an opportunity to integrate infant safe sleep education into programs that are already successfully reaching families. LA County must rethink

² <https://news.feinberg.northwestern.edu/2023/06/16/dads-are-key-in-supporting-breastfeeding-safe-infant-sleep/>; <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2023-06-16/safe-sleep-successful-breastfeeding-thrive-with-dads-help>

how to share sharing information with all parents, including new fathers, about safe sleep and the very real and heartbreaking potential consequences. Given the ongoing budget crisis and cuts to our health safety net, and the newly launched YCIC unit, the County must align services, leverage resources, and strengthen coordination between Departments and community partners to ensure that all parents and caregivers have access to the information they need to make informed choices for their families.

WE, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors direct the Department of Public Health, in partnership with the Department of Children and Families Services and First 5 LA to:

1. Convene all relevant County departments, including but not limited to the Department of Health Services (DHS), Department of Mental Health (DMH), Department of Public Social Services (DPSS), Chief Executive Office Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative (CEO-ARDI), Chief Executive Office Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations (CEO-LAIR), Child Support Services (CSSD), Chief Executive Office Communications, Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), and County Library, along with hospitals, birthing centers, trusted community-based organizations, fatherhood-serving organizations, home visiting providers, and other relevant stakeholders, within 60 days, to develop recommendations for a culturally responsive infant safe sleep education and outreach campaign specifically designed to engage fathers, co-parents, grandparents, and other caregivers.
2. Ensure that recommendations developed pursuant to Directive No. 1 incorporate evidence-based and culturally responsive strategies that:

- a. Increase awareness of American Academy of Pediatrics safe sleep recommendations;
 - b. Utilize trusted messengers, including fathers with lived experience, community health workers, doulas, peer navigators, faith leaders, and Cultural Brokers;
 - c. Address racial and ethnic disparities in sleep-related infant deaths, particularly among Black families disproportionately impacted by infant mortality;
 - d. Build upon and coordinate with existing County initiatives, including DCFS's Strong Foundations: The Black Fatherhood Legacy Initiative and DPH's African American Infant and Maternal Mortality (AAIMM) Prevention Initiative, including Black Daddy Dialogue and the Expecting Fathers Group for Black Dads, Home Visitation Programs, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome/Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Syndrome/ Safe Sleep Program, Comprehensive Perinatal Services Program, and ABC's of Safe Sleep Campaign; and
 - e. Identify opportunities to integrate safe sleep education into existing County and community touchpoints, including prenatal care, pediatric visits, childbirth education, home visiting programs, fatherhood programs, hospitals, provider training programs, foster care and child welfare services, WIC programs, libraries, and faith-based community settings.
3. Submit a written report back to the Board in 120 days that includes:
 - a. Proposed campaign materials and messaging;

- b. A multilingual outreach and communications strategy;
 - c. Recommendations for digital, print, social media, and community-based outreach;
 - d. Recommendations for expanding father-focused and caregiver-focused safe sleep education;
 - e. Metrics and proposed performance indicators to evaluate campaign effectiveness and community reach; and
 - f. Any additional policy, funding, staffing, or legislative recommendations needed to support implementation.
4. Submit a written report back to the Board in 180 days with a cross-departmental coordination and implementation plan that:
- a. Aligns County safe sleep messaging, resources, and prevention efforts across departments and contracted providers;
 - b. Identifies opportunities to leverage existing County and philanthropic funding streams and avoid duplication of services;
 - c. Establishes a centralized inventory of existing safe sleep resources, programs, and supports available to families throughout Los Angeles County;
 - d. Identifies opportunities to expand access to cribs, bassinets, and other approved safe sleep environments for low-income families and families involved with County systems;

- e. Recommends strategies to improve ongoing data collection, community engagement, and public awareness regarding sleep-related infant deaths and disparities;
 - f. Establishes metrics for success and plans for continued evaluation and
 - g. Explores opportunities to expand successful father-focused engagement models, including DCFS's Strong Foundations: The Black Fatherhood Legacy Initiative and DPH AAIMM fatherhood programs, to additional Service Planning Areas (SPAs) and County offices serving families with young children ages 0–5.
5. Report back in writing within 180 days on opportunities to partner with hospitals, managed care plans, community clinics, and philanthropic organizations to support sustainable funding and long-term implementation of infant safe sleep prevention efforts countywide.

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