Pregnant Women Receive Mental Health Support

**The Challenge:** Research shows that stress can negatively impact pregnancy and can contribute to low birthweight, prematurity and infant mortality. High levels of stress and trauma are especially taxing on racial minorities living in poverty because of limited access to resources for managing hardships. More efforts targeting distressed neighborhoods and families in vulnerable socio-economic positions offer some hope in reversing the devastating trends of infant mortality in African-American communities.

**Project Goal:** The Strong Families Healthy Homes (SFHH) program sought to address mental health and stress among Milwaukee-area families in ZIP codes with the highest rates of infant mortality. Over the past 10 years, the SFHH program primarily focused on parents with children, rather than expecting mothers. This year-long project involved 12 pregnant, African-American women who have a history of mental illness or substance abuse.

Women received intensive and individualized services, including in-home visits from master’s degree-level mental health professionals, and participated in prenatal education programs.

**Results:** Self-reported survey responses from participants indicated that all babies born had a healthy birthweight and only one baby was born pre-term. The number of participants connected to a mental health provider at the beginning of the project nearly doubled, with nearly three of four participants connected to a mental health provider after the intervention. Participants also self-reported feeling more confident about the support they received from their families and significant others, and that they developed an increased sense of control over their lives.

Initial enrollment in the project posed some challenges because many participants feared that the child welfare system would be more likely to intervene if they participated in this program. For many participants, meeting their basic needs, such as food and shelter, was stressful, so focusing on their mental health was difficult. However, due to the program’s strong focus on engagement, participants’ fears were eased and there was increased understanding of how the project could improve their overall health.

Through this grant, Mental Health America of Wisconsin (MHA-WI) found SFHH to be a vital program for pregnant women and has received additional local funding to continue the project. As a result, graduate-level internship and externship opportunities were formed and a staff position was added to support the students. MHA-WI also partnered with the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare and Milwaukee County to provide peer support services topregnant women with mental health and substance abuse issues.