

Keeping babies alive: Battling an entrenched infant mortality problem in Memphis

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There are places today in the United States where babies die at rates higher than in Third World countries; as high as 15 per 1000 in the part of Memphis Tennessee served by the Regional Medical Center of Memphis. The reasons? Poverty and poor prenatal care resulting from a lack of understanding and limited access to such services. Those babies that do survive spend days or months in newborn intensive care units hooked up to a jumble of wires and tubes keeping them alive. If these children finally do go home they face the problem of growing up in poverty and repeating the cycle. Those who don't go home end up in a tiny box in the county cemetery with a small metal marker.

Health leaders in Memphis are trying something new, a relatively new idea called "centering pregnancy," which builds a community among pregnant women who remain in the same prenatal classes through out their pregnancies. The soon-to-be moms learn from and support one another. Several other such classes are expected to start as soon as monies become available. The programs cannot reach every pregnant mother in Memphis, so babies will continue to end up in the newborn intensive care unit. The sentiment of one hospital worker may state it best, "We have treated 48,000 babies here. Infant mortality is still a problem. We're a Band-Aid. As soon as a premature baby is born, society has failed."