

Rep. Stubbs: Statement on Black infant and maternal health disparities in Wisconsin

Posted on Wednesday, May 24, 2023

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

MADISON - In recent weeks, the Wisconsin Department of Health Services published a report entitled *Perinatal Periods of Risk (PPOR) in Wisconsin - Non-Hispanic Black Communities, 2015-2019*. On Tuesday, May 23rd, 2023, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published *No end to racial gap in infant mortality* which featured input from DHS chief medical officer for maternal health, and pediatrician, Dr. Jasmine Zapata.

Rep. Stubbs (D-Madison) released the following statement:

“In the newly released report by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) entitled [Perinatal Periods of Risk \(PPOR\) in Wisconsin - Non-Hispanic Black Communities, 2015-2019](#), data shows what many of us Black Wisconsinites already know to be true: our community is suffering; our Black mothers and Black babies are dying, and all at much higher rates than any other racial group in Wisconsin. In the nation, Wisconsin ranks among the worst states’ in Black infant mortality. While our states’ overall infant mortality rate from 2019-2021 was 5.7 deaths per every 1,000 live births, our Black infants had the worse outcomes with 13.2 deaths for every 1,000 live births. It is sickening to know that this disparity exists and refuse to do anything to fix it. Our Black babies and their families deserve so much better and we are failing, as a state, to protect them.”

“I am, quite frankly, ashamed and embarrassed that our state continues to rank so highly in poor birth outcomes among BIPOC babies. While some of our legislators refuse to acknowledge that racial disparities exist in our state at all, Black Wisconsinites continue to suffer the effects of unmitigated, unrelenting violence and discrimination. From their first breath, a Black infant is propelled into a world that

does not consider their life as worthy. We know this because data shows that Black infants are three times more likely to die before their first birthday compared to white infants. Even when all factors are controlled for and we compare the richest white mothers to the richest Black mothers, Black babies still die at higher rates. This indicates that these deaths are rooted in systemic and institutional racism. Our policies are written and our systems are built to destroy Black children and Black families. This is unacceptable.”

“Wisconsin DHS Chief Medical Officer for Maternal Health and pediatrician, Dr. Jasmine Zapata, offers critical insight into the nature of this heartbreaking problem in a recent Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [article](#). She explains that these inequities persist because we fail to make fundamental societal change, including in areas of accessible, quality health care, food insecurity, and in training medical professionals about racism and implicit bias. Along with these necessary efforts, two prevention areas are highlighted in the DHS report, Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) and Low Birthweight. The high rates of these poor health outcomes in the non-Hispanic Black community harken back to the exorbitant racial disparities that plague Black Wisconsinites. Some factors that are implicated in producing worse outcomes include living in poverty, lacking access to quality and culturally appropriate preconception care, prenatal care, and postpartum care, lacking reproductive autonomy and reproductive justice, experiencing stressful events, and more. We must choose to build communities that properly care for our mothers and babies. We can ensure Black babies and Black mothers’ welfare by implementing a continuum of care throughout pregnancy and through the first year of the child’s life.”

“In the 2021 legislative session, I introduced the [Birth Equity Act \(BEA\)](#) in Wisconsin. BEA is a package of bills aimed at achieving maternal and child health equity in our state. Legislation in this bill would create necessary health initiatives that would greatly reduce poor maternal and child health outcomes overall, and drastically decrease racial disparities in health outcomes for BIPOC Wisconsinites. AB 698 would provide an at-home wellness visit within the first two weeks of delivery, ensuring that mothers and infants are supported during this crucial transition and incredibly vulnerable time. AB 697 would mandate insurance coverage of maternal mental health risk screenings, creating the opportunity to enhance and protect the overall health and wellbeing of the family system. AB 700 would remove sales tax on breastfeeding equipment and supplies, creating access to necessary equipment and support and working to prevent SUID. AB 701 would repeal Wisconsin’s birth

cost recovery law. AB 699 would establish pregnancy as a qualifying event for employer-sponsored health plans. And AB 696 would expand access to dental care for pregnant BadgerCare recipients. The implementation of these bills will mark a turning point in maternal and infant health in Wisconsin. Every Wisconsinite will benefit from an accessible health care system that provides the highest quality of care throughout the life course.”

“In the 2023 legislative session I will reintroduce the Birth Equity Act. It is necessary to combat the pervasive racial disparities in our state. We must address an inequitable healthcare system that lets Black mothers and Black babies die. We must affirm our commitment to improving every system and institution that exacerbates harm in the Black community. There is no other option if we are truly committed to protecting and enhancing the wellbeing and life quality of every Wisconsinite. Make no mistake, this is a call to action. I will leave you with the profound words of former First Lady Michelle Obama who said: “Communities, countries and ultimately the world are only as strong as the health of their women.”