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Child Fatality Task Force releases 2022 Annual Report

RALEIGH — Last week, the [North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force](#) (Task Force) submitted its [2022 Annual Report](#) to Governor Roy Cooper and the NC General Assembly. The report contains data on child deaths and recommendations for changes in law to prevent child deaths formulated by the Task Force after studying data, hearing presentations by agency leaders and experts in child health and safety, and hearing recommendations from child death reviews.

In December 2021, the Task Force examined the state's latest finalized data on [child deaths](#) and [infant mortality](#). In 2020, North Carolina lost 1,279 children, which represents a death rate of 55.5 per 100,000 North Carolina children ages 0 to 17, a slight increase compared to 54.9 in 2019. This rate is about half of what it was in 1991 when the Task Force was created; however, the rate has not changed significantly during the past decade.

Nearly two-thirds of all child deaths in North Carolina are of infants under one year old. In 2020, the infant mortality rate in North Carolina was 6.9 per 1,000 births, which is the 8th highest rate in the U.S. Data presented to the Task Force showed that racial disparities in rates persist and that areas of the state with the highest infant mortality rates are also areas with the highest social determinant of health risk factors such as poverty and unemployment.

For 2022, the Task Force made nine legislative recommendations, most of which are being repeated from prior years.

“In order to respond to concerning data trends and system problems the Task Force has identified for several years now, the Task Force has come back to many of the same strategies because they are as important as ever to prevent child deaths, and we hope to see legislation that partially advanced in 2021 become law in 2022,” said Karen McLeod, Chair of the Task Force.

Examples of such data and recommendations include the following:

- **From 2011 through 2020, North Carolina lost 525 children ages 17 and younger to firearm injuries, including 105 children in 2020 alone when firearm death rates skyrocketed along with sales of firearms.** Firearms are used in about half of youth suicides in North Carolina, and each year there are hundreds of firearm-related hospitalizations and emergency visits for children in the state. The Task Force has a recommendation to launch and fund a statewide firearm safe storage education and awareness initiative that would help communities across the state launch locally tailored safety initiatives. This recommendation was addressed in House Bill 427 in 2021, which passed the House and is eligible for consideration in 2022.
- **Local child death review teams in every county in North Carolina are required by law to collectively review all child deaths (more than 1,000 per year)** to identify and address local and state-level system deficiencies to prevent future deaths and child maltreatment. However, the state lacks centralized state-level coordination, technical support and effective data collection and reporting for these teams to optimize their efforts. The Task Force has a set of recommendations to strengthen the statewide Child Fatality Prevention System, addressed in Senate Bill 703 in 2021, which did not receive a hearing.
- **From 2015 to 2019, 664 infant deaths in North Carolina were associated with unsafe sleep environments (621 deaths) or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (43 deaths).** North Carolina currently spends \$45,000 per year on programs to prevent these deaths and the Task Force is again recommending increased funding for a total of \$250,000 per year, which amounts to about \$2.10 per baby in North Carolina.
- **Suicide rates for youth have been rising during the past decade and the Task Force has acknowledged the significant youth mental health crisis in North Carolina.** Multiple national organizations have echoed

the types of recommendations focused on by the Task Force that emphasize the important role schools play in addressing this crisis and the urgent need to dedicate resources and funding to connect kids to mental health supports in the context of schools and elsewhere.

Other legislative recommendations of the Task Force for 2022 involve strategies aimed at preventing impaired driving, preventing harm to youth and infants caused by tobacco and nicotine use, strengthening the state's infant safe surrender law, eliminating a law that is a barrier to completing pedestrian safety projects and funding to enable comprehensive toxicology testing in all child deaths under the jurisdiction of the NC Medical Examiner System.

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