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Child Fatality Task Force releases 2023 Annual Report

RALEIGH — The [North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force](#) (Task Force) has submitted its [2023 Annual Report](#) to Governor Cooper and the NC General Assembly. The report contains data on child deaths and recommendations for changes in law as well as for state funding to prevent child deaths and promote child well-being.

For 2023, the Task Force made [11 legislative recommendations](#) that address a range of issues, among them: a significant increase in child gun deaths; an increase in youth suicide and a crisis in youth mental health; infant deaths in unsafe sleep environments; strengthening the statewide child fatality prevention system; preterm birth; child abuse and neglect; motor vehicle deaths; harm caused by tobacco and nicotine use, and more. Data and information supporting these recommendations are included in the annual report.

Task Force recommendations are formulated by examining data and hearing from experts about programs and prevention strategies. The Task Force also gets some information and recommendations from team reviews of child deaths, and one of the Task Force legislative recommendations seeks to significantly strengthen the collection, analysis, and reporting of such information.

“Our statewide child fatality prevention system, which includes child death review teams in every county, needs to be restructured and strengthened to optimize the work of these teams and to ensure that information learned from reviews is effectively used at the state and local level to prevent future child deaths and to strengthen child well-being,” said Karen McLeod, Co-Chair of the Task Force.

North Carolina is one of only two states not using the National Fatality Review Case Reporting System, a free system designed for states to collect and report aggregate information learned from child death reviews.

“Use of this national data system would dramatically increase our ability to understand child deaths, but we also need to restructure the child fatality prevention system to eliminate duplication of reviews and provide sufficient state-level support for local teams to ensure effective use of the national data system,” McLeod said.

A few data highlights that illustrate the importance of Task Force recommendations include the following:

- **The infant mortality rate** in 2021 was 6.8 per 1,000 live births compared to 6.9 in 2020, and 6.8 in both 2018 and 2019. While the rate of 6.8 remains the lowest rate NC has recorded, this rate keeps North Carolina among 15% of states with the highest infant mortality rates in the country. The Task Force is recommending Medicaid funding to support maternal healthcare strategies known to produce better birth outcomes, and funding to expand efforts to prevent infant deaths related to unsafe sleep.
- **The firearm death rates for children ages 0 - 17 increased dramatically in 2020 and in 2021.** NC saw an increase of 231.3% between 2012 and 2021. Firearms were the lethal means used in most youth suicides and homicides. A 2021 CDC student survey showed 30% of North Carolina high school students reporting that it would take them less than an hour to get and be ready to fire a loaded gun without a parent or other adult’s permission. The Task Force is recommending a statewide firearm safe storage initiative.
- **The 2021 suicide rate (ages 10 – 17) represents the highest rate in two decades,** and firearm-related suicides in particular have increased. A 2021 CDC student survey showed 22% of NC high school students had seriously considered attempting suicide and 43% of high school students said they felt sad or hopeless. The Task Force is recommending funds to increase numbers of school nurses, social workers, counselors and psychologists, as the numbers of these professionals in NC are far below national recommendations.

Finalized child death and infant mortality data for 2021 was not available in time for the Task Force to examine prior to concluding its meetings in 2022, however, the Task Force was able to examine provisional 2021 data. Finalized 2021 data is now available and is included in the 2023 Annual Report.*

*2021 [child death data](#) and [infant mortality data](#) are available on the website for the NC State Center for Health Statistics. A webinar providing an overview of the 2021 data will take place today, February 27th, at 3:00, [register to attend here](#).