The death of a baby is a heartbreaking tragedy. In Nashville, we lose over 70 infants each year—one every five days. The circumstances sometimes seem beyond anyone's control, but many of these deaths are preventable. What opportunities are we missing to prevent tragedy and give these babies a safe and healthy start in life?

First, 1 in 4 infant deaths results from an infant being placed in unsafe sleeping conditions. From 2009-2013, we lost 73 infants in this way. How can we prevent these? We need to teach parents and anyone else who might care for an infant, even for a short time, the ABC's of Safe Sleep. Infants must sleep Alone, on their Back and in a Crib. Sleeping in a bed with siblings or adults, in a crib with blankets or pads, or being put down on their stomach might seem comfortable or appealing, but can be deadly. Practicing the ABCs and insisting that every caregiver practices them will save lives and let more babies see their first birthday. No family should have to mourn a child because they or their babysitter did not understand the consequences of putting an infant in an unsafe sleeping environment.

Second, many infant deaths are due to premature birth. In Nashville nearly one in every 10 babies is born early. What can we do to prevent these deaths? We must make sure that women have access to health care, healthy food, and the support needed to manage chronic health conditions and optimize their health before, during, and after pregnancy. The Insure Tennessee Plan could save lives by helping women who are now uninsured to maintain health before pregnancy. We also must work to make sure prenatal care begins as early in the pregnancy as possible.

The infant mortality rate is a crucial indicator of our community's health. It reflects not just medical care surrounding pregnancy and childbirth, but also the social and economic strengths and stressors of women and families. The latest data show Nashville with an infant mortality rate of 7.6 deaths per 1,000 live births. Our rate is worse than the U.S. average of 6 deaths per 1,000 live births, and the U.S. rate is nothing to be proud of, as our nation ranks last among developed countries.

It is striking that our babies' health differs from neighborhood to neighborhood. In some Nashville neighborhoods, the rate of premature births is 1 out of 7 while in others it is 1 out of 25. Predictably, poor and disinvested communities do worse than affluent ones. What are we doing about that? Beyond health services and safe sleep, the work we do as a community to promote education, economic opportunity, safe neighborhoods, and access to healthy food must be treated with urgency because it saves lives.

Nashville has made progress over the last nine years in reducing infant mortality rates, but too many still die. We must renew our commitment to ensuring that our tiniest residents survive and thrive.
September is National Infant Mortality Awareness Month. For more information on safe sleep and other healthy baby tips, please visit http://health.nashville.gov.
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