

## POLICY POSITION

### 6. INFANT MORTALITY IN THE SOUTH

The United States infant mortality rate ranks among the highest of all industrialized countries. In 1980, the U.S. infant mortality rate was 12.6/1000 live births as compared to a rate of 12/1000 for the United Kingdom, 11/1000 for Canada, 10/1000 for France and 7/1000 for Japan. Rates for non-whites and southerners have remained consistently higher than the national average. In 1960, when the U.S. rate was 26.1/1000 live births, the rate in the South was 29.0/1000. In 1980, the U.S. rate was 12.6/1000 live births while the rate for the South was 13.8/1000. These rates are 11.1 percent and 9.5 percent higher respectively than the national average for those years. As is true nationally, the non-white infant mortality rate in the South remains dramatically higher than the white rate.

(The "South" referred to in the statistics above is the "Census South", which includes the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.)

The 1980 Commission on the Future of the South, Task Force on Children issued two reports on infant mortality in the South entitled "Factors Associated with Infant Mortality" and "Infant Mortality and Teenage Pregnancy Profile of Children in the South". The task force reported that, "...the U.S. has made substantial progress in reducing the risk factors for pregnant women and young babies; the rate is now only one-eighth of what it was in 1980... However, the picture is not equally rosy for all regions of the country, all races and all socioeconomic groups...non-whites and southerners have a distinct disadvantage in producing healthy, viable babies, and this disparity has not been significantly lessened with the recent improvement in the overall rates."

Poverty, teenage pregnancy, lack of access to care, limited education and demographic characteristics such as race and family patterns all correlate highly with infant mortality. The solutions to the problem are multiple and complex, reaching far beyond the medical scope of the issue into public policy and social awareness. Early and adequate prenatal care, pre-planning for hospital delivery, high risk screening, sufficient nutrition, counseling and financial assistance are all needed if we are to improve our rate nationally and in the region.

In recent years, the federal government has moved to turn financial and administrative responsibility for maternal and child health programs over to the states. While the states welcome the increased flexibility to target resources on the areas of greatest importance, the

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a Southern Regional Infant Mortality Task Force. The Task Force would bring together, with in each southern state and across the region, governors, legislators, public health officials, clinicians and lay and professional advocates. The Task Force would promote initiatives to narrow the infant mortality gap between the South and the rest of the country and to reduce the incidence of infant mortality and low birth weight throughout the region by:

- o documenting the scope of infant mortality and factors related to its prevalence throughout the South;
- o raising the level of public awareness of the problem;
- o monitoring the progress of individual southern states in reducing their infant mortality and low birth weight rates; and
- o highlighting and transferring ideas and experiences of successful state programs, with a view toward the development of regional prototypes.

### Recommendations

The Task Force should receive staff assistance through the region's Washington Office, through which the Southern Governors' Association and the Southern Legislative Conference conduct their federal affairs activities. Reports of the Task Force's activities should be provided to the SLC at its regularly scheduled meetings.

Adopted at the Southern Legislative Conference Annual Meeting on August 15, 1984, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Previously Adopted at the 1984 Annual Meeting of the Southern Governors' Association, Williamsburg, Virginia.

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