

## 1. POLICY POSITION

### SUPPORT OF THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL PROJECT ON INFANT MORTALITY

#### BACKGROUND

The Southern Regional Project on Infant Mortality (Project) was established as a joint initiative of the Southern Legislative Conference and the Southern Governors' Association in 1984. The Project was created out of the need to provide states with research and policy analyses on the contributing factors to infant mortality and low birthweight births and recommend strategies to address these problems. For more than a decade, the Project has supported states' information needs by functioning as a clearinghouse and providing them with data and strategies for improving maternal and child health. This is done by generating major policy reports, issues briefs, newsletters, fact sheets, manuals, statistics and videotapes. More importantly, the Project has convened state and regional summits and conferences and been successful in bringing together state and community leaders, policymakers and advocates to forge consensus and craft a blueprint for infant mortality reduction in the southern region. Indeed, the message over the years has been: "Let's improve access to health education and services for women and their families so that babies are born healthier and states can reduce costs."

The Project's work focuses on issues ranging from ensuring access to health care through Medicaid expansions, to improving access to substance abuse treatment services for pregnant women, to adolescent pregnancy prevention, to expanding health providers in underserved areas, to promoting community level responses to perinatal health issues.

The Project is totally grant funded and staffed by a Director, two policy analysts and a program assistant. The majority of funding comes from private foundations, corporations and the federal government. The Southern Legislative Conference has contributed \$25,000 per year for the past three years and Southern Governors' Association has contributed \$25,000 per year for the past two years. The Project also receives some revenue through the sale of its publications.

The Project's work continues to be important because although the infant mortality rate has declined over the years, the low birthweight rate has increased. This means that more babies are being born smaller and sicker resulting in enormous health and welfare costs for states.

The Southern Regional Project on Infant Mortality supports the work of governors, state legislators and their staffs in their efforts to improve maternal and child health and reduce infant mortality in the South.

In 1992 (the latest year for which statistics are available), the South's infant mortality rate was 10.2 percent as compared to 12.6 percent in 1985, a 19 percent decline. The low birthweight rate has risen since 1985 from 8 percent to 8.7 percent. The Project continues to support the work of states to promote primary prevention and enhanced access to prenatal care for pregnant women to reduce low birthweight births and infant mortality rates.

Governor Pedro Rossello of Puerto Rico is the Project's Lead Governor and Arkansas State Senator Roy Lewellen is the Project's Lead Legislator. These individuals are appointed to work with the Project by the SGA and the SLC. The Project has an Advisory Board to provide guidance on policy initiatives comprised of a gubernatorial appointment and legislative appointment from 17 southern states, the territories of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Washington, D.C. Governor Rossello and Senator Lewellen co-chair this Board.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

In recognition of the continuing need to address the problem of infant mortality and low birthweight births in the South, the Southern Legislative Conference recommends the continued support of the Southern Regional Project on Infant Mortality in the following ways:

- ▶ support the existence of the Southern Regional Project on Infant Mortality and direct the Project to continue its mission to support governors, legislators and their staffs in their efforts to improve maternal and child health and reduce infant mortality in the South;
- ▶ direct the Advisory Board of the Southern Regional Project on Infant Mortality to continue to advise and guide the work of the Project; and
- ▶ contribute \$25,000 to the Project in support of its work, effective immediately for the 1995 - 1996 fiscal year.

Adopted by the Southern Legislative Conference, August 15, 1995, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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