

# New Jersey's Stillbirth Problem

(and what nurses are doing to help fix it)

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It is common knowledge that mothers/perinatal individuals in New Jersey (NJ) are sadly dying in higher numbers than most other states, but did you know about New Jersey's stillbirth problem? According to the National Center for Health Statistics (2022), NJ has the eighth highest stillbirth rate in the country. This equates to an average of 1.9 stillbirths daily and 700 annually! And if that wasn't tragic enough, most NJ residents are unaware that every pregnancy is at risk and many stillbirths are preventable.

In early 2023, the NJ Department of Health (NJDOH) released a request for proposals to create a statewide stillbirth awareness campaign. Funding was awarded to the three maternal child health consortia (e.g. Partnership for Maternal & Child Health of Northern New Jersey, Central Jersey Family Health Consortium, and Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative [now called The Cooperative]) to create the campaign. Four expert nurses, including this author, from

the consortia collaborated with Debbie Haine Vijayvergiya, a stillbirth advocate and mother with lived experience, along with our respective marketing and communications teams to create Stillbirth Can Happen to Any Pregnancy.

The campaign launched in October 2023 at Capital Health Medical Center-Hopewell. Representatives from the NJDOH and Nurture NJ spoke as did two mothers from the campaign's Family Advisory Board (FAB). The campaign's website, NJStillbirth.org, contains education and tips for parents on how to have a healthy pregnancy and the importance of fetal movement awareness as well as education on compassionate communication and post-stillbirth evaluation for healthcare professionals. In addition, visitors to the website will find grief support for parents and those supporting grieving parents, stories of loss from six mothers on our FAB, and resources such as support groups and genetic counseling providers and book recommenda-

tions for adults and children. The website contents are available and can be printed in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, and Tagalog, the top five languages spoken by NJ residents.

As an advanced practice nurse with more than 40 years' experience in obstetrics and providing support after perinatal loss, it is clear to me that one of the most important points of education that we can share with perinatal individuals is the importance of fetal movement awareness. We used to advise daily fetal "kick" counts, but we now know that awareness of movement patterns is also important, "especially during the third trimester" (Association of Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses [AWHONN], 2024, p.e1). In their 2024 Practice Brief, AWHONN included that healthcare providers should trust the perinatal individual's perception of fetal movement and evaluate the health of the fetus each and every time decreased fetal movement is reported. Furthermore, nurses and other healthcare providers should clearly explain the rationale for and emphasize the critical nature of monitoring fetal movement, because Stillbirth Can Happen to Any Pregnancy. ■

## References:

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- Gregory, E.C.W., Valenzuela, C.P., Hoyert, D.L. (2022). Fetal mortality: United States, 2020. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, (71)4. National Center for Health Statistics. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:118420>