



** This news release from K-State Research and Extension is available online at <https://ksre-learn.com/maternity-care-in-kansas>

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State groups come together to address maternity care in Kansas

2023 report indicates low grades for Kansas in care before, during and after birth

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – A 2023 annual report by the March of Dimes on maternal health care in Kansas has highlighted a need for the state to address a potential crisis for birthing-age mothers and their babies.

The [2023 March of Dimes Report Card](#) found that 45.7% of Kansas counties are defined as maternity care deserts – indicating a lack of obstetric providers, and lack of hospitals and birth centers with obstetric care. Last year, the report notes, 8.4% of birthing-age women -- 1 in 12 -- had no birthing hospital within 30 minutes.

“There are certain barriers that Kansas women of reproductive age have to deal with,” said Elaine Johannes, the Kansas Health Foundation’s Distinguished Professor of Community Health at Kansas State University.

“The number one barrier is distance, and that’s where the ‘desert’ idea comes from, but they also have to overcome barriers due to lack of health insurance and lack of providers.”

The March of Dimes reports that women in Kansas, overall, have a high vulnerability to adverse outcomes due to the availability of – or lack thereof – reproductive health services, including care for the mother before, during and after their child’s birth.

Statistics indicate that, among birthing mothers in Kansas, there were 22.0 deaths per 100,000 births in 2023, either during the pregnancy or within six weeks after the pregnancy ended. The infant mortality rate in Kansas in 2023 was reported at 5.3 deaths per 1,000.

The rates among black birthing mothers and their babies were much higher.

In 2023, the Kansas Department of Health and the Environment Bureau of Family Health was awarded \$1.1 million from the [U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration](#) to launch the State Maternal Health Innovation, MHI, program in Kansas.

The goal: Implement maternal health services across Kansas, such as improving access to services during pregnancy and the postpartum period, or equipping the maternal and child health workforce with training and resources.

“I think most of us understand that being a healthcare provider is a challenging career,” Johannes said. “It’s very rewarding, but it is challenging. And there are projections currently that look at where maternity care deserts will be – and there will be some hotspots around the state – but primarily those are in our rural areas.”

Johannes serves on a committee formed by MHI, which is administered by Wichita State University’s Community Engagement Institute. The group’s first meeting was held in late May; over time, the group will conduct baseline assessments of the state’s maternal care, identify gaps, write a strategic plan and help staff carry out new interventions.

“Kansas is not alone,” Johannes said. “There is a concern about access to maternal care in many rural and frontier states, as well as the cost of that care. Rural states, and many Midwest states, have a challenge to recruit and keep healthcare providers.”

She adds that maternal care “is not just a women’s issue.”

“It affects the men that are part of our families and our communities, too. I remember one of our extension directors told me that if there’s a death in a small town, it affects the whole community. There’s a ripple effect. And so I think we can all contribute toward being watchful and helpful with pregnant moms and their families, looking at our access points and helping with providers and policy changes.”

Johannes said the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is another good resource for women. [The CDC supports a campaign called HEAR HER](#), which can help pregnant and postpartum women and their families recognize signs and symptoms of maternal distress.

A longer discussion with Johannes on her work with the Maternal Health Innovation program is available on the online program, [Sound Living](#), produced by K-State Research and Extension.

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FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

2023 March of Dimes Report Card, <https://www.marchofdimes.org/report-card>

State Maternal Health Innovation program (U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration), <https://mchb.hrsa.gov/programs-impact/programs/state-mhi>

HEAR HER Campaign (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), <https://www.cdc.gov/hearher/index.html>

Sound Living (podcast from K-State Research and Extension), <https://soundlivingksu.libsyn.com>

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