



Air Traffic Controller for Maternal Health Equity

Who: Henry Ford Health

Where: Southeastern Michigan, including Detroit

What: Henry Ford Health created a Director of Maternal Health Equity to lead a systemwide strategy to advance equity and respectful high-quality maternal and newborn care.

WHY: Health equity is part of the DNA of Henry Ford Health (HFH), a major health system serving metropolitan Detroit. HFH has participated in the Women-Inspired Neighborhood Network: Detroit, a consortium of the major health systems serving Detroit to reduce the metro area's infant mortality rate for more than 15 years.

Despite this important work, southeastern Michigan still has a Black maternal and infant mortality rate three times that of white women. When HFH leaders assessed maternal health outcomes across their system, the data revealed racial disparities, for example, in postpartum hemorrhage rates – a leading cause of largely preventable maternal mortality.

HFH realized success would require a comprehensive, sustained focus on Black maternal health, and a way to lead and coordinate systemwide efforts across five hospitals using the institution's existing architecture for quality improvement.

GOALS:

- To reduce maternal and infant mortality in specific regions in Southeastern Michigan, including Detroit, and
- To reduce the rates of severe maternal postpartum hemorrhage and maternal hypertension in African American and Latina women by 40 percent by 2025.

HOW: In 2021, the HFH executive leadership and board of directors identified maternal and infant mortality as the top priority in their health equity work. This included allocating the funding and assigning the authority for a new, systemwide position, Director of Maternal Health Equity. This position coordinates the people, processes, and tools necessary to reduce maternal and infant mortality and achieve equitable outcomes, particularly for Black and Latina women – like an air traffic controller for maternal health equity. This position is currently held by an accomplished board-certified maternal-fetal medicine physician.

The Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice Strategic Plan, developed by the executive leadership and approved by the board of directors in early 2021, included tactics to deliver highly reliable, equitable, and respectful maternal and infant care. The plan identified measurable goals for reducing rates of maternal and infant mortality, postpartum hemorrhage, maternal hypertension, and risk of sudden unexplained infant death in Black and Latinx women and babies. HFH also convened the Maternal Infant Health Equity Strategic Taskforce, a team of maternity care providers, pediatricians, neonatologists, inpatient and ambulatory nurses, hospital administrative staff, doulas, lawyers, a data analyst, and birthing people.

The Director of Maternal Health Equity meets monthly with HFH's Women and Children's Council, which includes leaders from all five hospitals, to implement this strategic plan systemwide. Planned initiatives include mobile integrated postpartum home health visits and social needs screening at all prenatal and pediatric visits. The director also actively supports initiatives related to the root causes of racial and ethnic maternal and infant health inequities through social justice and systems change, and by equipping the surrounding communities with resources.

RESULTS: To ensure the level of attention and resources needed to advance maternal health equity, HFH established a new position to develop and lead a five-year strategic plan.

The Takeaway

Establishing and resourcing a senior-level position exclusively dedicated to advancing equity across maternity services is an innovative strategy for the complex task of providing high-quality, respectful, and equitable maternity care necessary to increase survival of Black women and infants within Southeastern Michigan.