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Mental Health America of Lake County Empowers Families

At Mental Health America of Lake County we are transforming communities through proven programs that educate, empower, and strengthen the way families function for life, but not in ways you might think for a mental health organization. For two decades, Mental Health America of Lake County has devoted its efforts to programming focused on prevention and early intervention in support of overall family well-being, by working with families with children ages 0-5.

We know that nothing transforms a family like the arrival of a new baby and all parents need support during this time. But for those facing the additional challenges of teen parenting, single parenting, and/or parenting with limited financial resources, this support is even more critical to ensure that both parents and children thrive.

That's why when the Indiana State Department of Health issued a request for proposals related to impacting the infant mortality rate in Indiana, the eighth highest in the country, we answered the call. In the region of Lake and Porter counties, one infant dies nearly every week. Together we can do better to ensure that Lake County babies reach this important milestone.

Let's start with our part. Since 1996, Mental Health America of Lake County has provided free, voluntary, home visiting parent education to families throughout the county through evidence based programs Healthy Families and Parents as Teachers, in addition to Empowering Teens as Parents. These programs help parents meet personal challenges and manage adversities by enhancing resiliency, as well as relate trusted child development information that builds parental confidence. These programs provide guidance and connect pregnant women to appropriate medical care to improve pregnancy outcomes. These one-on-one interactions with specially trained professionals contribute to reduced

rates of infant mortality. Studies have reported that infants whose families are not enrolled in home visiting are more than twice as likely to die in infancy. In 2016, 1,200 families benefited from these services totaling more than 12,000 home visits.

In terms of mental health, studies have found that depressed pregnant women have a higher risk for smoking, drinking and drug use which are factors that can increase the risk for poor perinatal outcomes. Depression, anxiety, and other mental disorders can inhibit a parent's ability to appropriately respond to the physical, emotional and social needs of their infant. In 2016, Mental Health America of Lake County hired its first mental health clinician to provide consultation to parent educators in order to shore up their competencies toward creating an intervention plan to help parents in need of therapeutic mental health services.

Several years ago Mental Health America of Lake County introduced its Infant Safe Sleep program. Since then more than 2,000 vulnerable families benefited from safe sleep education, by attending classes at our office location and leaving with a safety approved pack-n-play for baby to sleep. In 2016, this program was expanded to allow for education to be provided in the home of families who struggle with transportation issues. This spring, the program is again expanding to provide the option of a baby safe sleep bundle which serves as a safe sleep environment for babies up to 6 months of age and is based on a successful program designed in Finland—one of the leading nations with the lowest infant mortality rate. Our goal is to provide the opportunity for every Lake County parent to receive this important education and a safe sleep environment.

This year, we've also added evidence-based BABY & ME Tobacco Free education for pregnant women who smoke, offering free diapers to women who quit and stay quit after baby's birth. We're also working in conjunction with hospitals and health centers in the promotion of breastfeeding, proven to lower the risk of infant death.

In the recent NWI Times series on infant mortality one expert stated that reducing infant mortality is difficult due to the cumulative effects of many risk factors and

commented on the need to simultaneously address these factors. At Mental Health America of Lake County our dedicated staff is doing just that in conjunction with our funders including state agencies, the Lake Area United Way, Geminus Corporation, and private foundations, as well as the many health organizations and social and human service organizations that partner with us in this effort. What can you do to help? Spread the word about our programs available to pregnant women and families with new babies to seek out the education and support we provide because I'm sure you believe as we do that every baby deserves to celebrate his or her first birthday.