

Engage Your Community Around Your Most Vulnerable Children: Hold An Infant's Conference

On January 29th, 2021, Santa Clara County sponsored its first ever Infant's Conference. Led by First Five and leaders from all sectors of the county, the 5½ hour no-cost virtual conference featured a keynote address by Judge Douglas Johnson (ret.) from Omaha, Nebraska, one of the national leaders in the creation of specialized infant's courts. Two panels followed – one describing how cases involving infants reach the juvenile court, the second discussing the medical and support services responses to vulnerable infants. A second keynote featured Dr. Balaji Govindaswami, Division Chief, Neonatology, Cabell Huntington Hospital. A presentation by Kris Perry, Deputy Secretary, California Health & Human Services Agency for Early Childhood Development concluded the program.

More than 750 registrants attended, some from out-of-state. The conference offered information on how the county addresses the needs of vulnerable infants. The numerous questions from the registrants and positive evaluations indicated wide interest. After all, infants comprise the highest percentage of children entering the child welfare system. Their legal cases are heard in the juvenile dependency court, where few in the public are permitted to attend.

The response from the community has been enthusiastic. Participants reported they learned about the dependency system for the first time and wanted to become engaged to support these infants. The conference concluded describing ways interested citizens could join groups that work with infants such as the Child Advocate Program (CASA).

The planning team believes this is just the beginning of engaging a community-wide support system for vulnerable infants. Planning for the 2022 conference is underway.

I recommend other counties sponsor similar conferences focusing on the needs of infants, and particularly substance-exposed newborns. Federal law, the Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act of 2016 (CARA), sets out requirements for social service agencies and juvenile court judges when substance-exposed infants are born. Judges must determine whether the agency has created a Plan of Safe Care (POSC) for a substance-exposed infant. That plan must include the entire family, and the plan should include community partners. Additionally, CARA requires the agency to collect and maintain data on the number of substance-exposed babies born in their county.

Special attention to vulnerable infants in courts is not new to most states. There are Infant-Toddler Court programs throughout the country, at 99 sites in 30 states. There are none in California.

My suggestions:

1. Learn how your social service agency is dealing with drug exposed infants.
2. Get a copy of the Plan of Safe Care along with the petition in each case.
3. Learn how many drug exposed infants are born in your community – 'drug exposed' includes alcohol.
4. Learn what services are available for these infants and for their parents.
5. Consider working with Zero to Three to develop an Infant-Toddler Court in your county.

Holding a county-wide or regional conference focusing on vulnerable infants is an excellent way of raising community interest in these children and creating the opportunity to support them. It may also lead to the creation of a local Infant-Toddler Court.



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