

Opinion: At-risk infants need our attention now more than ever

Santa Clara County's first Infant Conference will explore needs of those without a voice



FIRST 5 CEO Jolene Smith will be part of a 5-hour virtual conference Jan. 29 that will collaborate with a group of dedicated county leaders aligned with a concern for at-risk infants. (Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group)

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There is no group in our community that needs our attention more than at-risk infants. The first two years of life are critical to the health and well-being of a human being. Besides being totally dependent on care givers for survival, this period is the most critical for brain development, with 80% of brain growth during this stage of life.

Unfortunately, the highest percentage of children entering the child welfare system are infants, those less than two years of age. These infants are usually from families under stress and with limited economic and social resources. Therefore, given that normal brain growth and development is dependent on a supportive and nurturing environment as well as social connectedness with caregivers, it is the responsibility of our social welfare system to meet the needs of these children in order to keep them on a life trajectory towards becoming productive citizens.

We also have to be aware that our society is stratified by social class, race, and ethnicity, and this stratification impacts the resources of families resulting in reduced ability to deal with life stresses. Although we live in one of the wealthiest areas in the nation, this wealth is not equally distributed. For example, nationally the median family wealth for Black and Latino families is one-tenth and one-eighth, respectively of non-Latino White families. This disparity can limit a family's ability to deal with life pressures. Given that California is the most diverse state in the union and Santa Clara County is the most diverse county in California, our child welfare system needs to be sensitive to these issues of diversity as we meet the needs of at-risk infants.

Like other children, these at-risk infants do not have a voice in Sacramento or other centers of policy making, but instead must trust us to understand their needs. Consequently, they rely on the child welfare system to see that their needs are met. Those on the ground with them – doctors, nurses, public health nurses, social workers and more – are their voices, their advocates. These are the professionals who care for them and support their parents and family members. Yet, it is not just their responsibility, but the responsibility of the community as a whole.