



New Report Finds 80% of States Improved Birth Defects Prevention in 2002, Yet Budget Crises Now Threaten Programs

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Washington, DC, April 29, 2003 – Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a nonprofit advocacy group, today issued a report that finds 43 states and territories have taken steps to improve their birth defects monitoring or registry programs during the past year. However, the report also found these programs, which are vital tools for birth defects prevention efforts, are now threatened due to cuts to public health programs in state budgets.

Birth defects are the leading cause of infant mortality in the U.S, accounting for approximately 20% of all infant deaths each year. Last year, TFAH released a report giving each state a letter grade based on its ability to monitor and research birth defects – only eight states received an A, and more than half the states received a C, D or F. Nearly one million births, nearly 25%, are currently not covered by any birth defects monitoring program.

TFAH's one-year anniversary update report released today, *Birth Defects Tracking and Prevention One Year Later – One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?*, found that in 2002 the majority of states have taken specific steps to improve their birth defects programs. The states and territories with improvements include: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, DC, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia.

Only two states, New York and New Jersey, received declining rankings, due to the loss of CDC funding and seven states had taken no action.

“State surveillance programs are the linchpin for finding causes of birth defects,” said Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, President of the March of Dimes.

Heightened state budget crises, however, have put many of the incremental improvements in birth defects registry programs at risk, with a number facing severe cuts or even the potential of complete elimination. Most registries are included within larger public health budget line items, and as those funds are cut, the registries are also decreased; in some cases they are disproportionately cut.

“Budget crises could deliver a fatal blow in our nation’s fight against birth defects, which are the leading cause of infant mortality,” said Shelley A. Hearne, DrPH, Executive Director of TFAH. “By slashing public health programs like birth defect monitoring, the states are missing an opportunity to realize serious long-term budget savings. In addition to their value in preventing birth defects and improving the health of children, funding robust birth defects monitoring programs could actually save states money over time. The cost of prevention programs are a fraction of the cost of treating chronic diseases and conditions.”

TFAH will issue the next full-scale birth defects tracking report in 2004.

TFAH’s mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities from current and emerging threats by strengthening the fundamentals of our public health defenses. More information about TFAH is available at www.healthyamericans.org.

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