

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS TO ADVANCE BREASTFEEDING JUSTICE IN KENT COUNTY



"The healthcare system is corrupt and they don't cater to us as individuals. You have to jump through so many hoops just to get questions answered and that is a huge downfall."

- Kent County Expert Participant

ABOUT:

Strong Beginnings is a community-wide effort to improve maternal, paternal and child health among African Americans and Latinxs, promote father engagement, and advance racial equity in birth outcomes. Strong Beginnings utilized MIBFN's Community Conversation model to lead a conversation to center the perspective of Black families and professionals in Kent County, Michigan throughout their birthing and breastfeeding experience. The Community Conversation virtually took place on May 6, 2023 and was facilitated/transcribed by Black community participants. Expert families were provided a gratitude stipend and catered meal to nourish their families.

FAST FACTS:



24 EXPERT FAMILIES



4 TRANSCRIBERS



17 BIRTHING PEOPLE



**6 PARTNERS/
SUPPORT PEOPLE**



**7 BIRTH/LACTATION
PROFESSIONALS**



4 BREAKOUT ROOMS



4 FACILITATORS



**2 MENTAL HEALTH
PROFESSIONALS**

STRONG BEGINNINGS

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

BARRIERS

INADEQUATE PRENATAL LACTATION EDUCATION AND COUNSELING

is being provided to Black birthing families.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA, ONGOING MEDICAL RACISM, AND BIRTH TRAUMA

are pervasive issues facing Black birthing families in Kent county.

SYSTEMS DO NOT SUPPORT FAMILIES,

like workplaces, child cares, child protective services, and many others.

SOCIETAL NORMS CREATE SHAME AND GUILT FOR LACTATING FAMILIES

around natural choices, like breastfeeding in public and extended breastfeeding.

"Breastfeeding education was more-so glossed over for me. They did not go into detail. It was not encouraged [as] very important."

"Folks said Black people don't breastfeed and asked me why I was breastfeeding."

"I struggled with going back to work and not having any place to breastfeed. I struggled with my chest hurting for hours."

"[Breastfeeding] was fine until my baby turned one. [After that], they told me that it was not normal. People were sexualizing breastfeeding because of her age."

STRONG BEGINNINGS

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

"If we have more cultural and ethnic representation, it would hopefully make things easier. We shouldn't have to worry about advocating and getting services."

LACK OF TRUSTED PROVIDERS THAT REFLECT AND REPRESENT THOSE THEY SERVE

makes it difficult for Black families to get the support they need.

"I've never encountered Black person assisting me in any way, shape, or form in [the] WIC office that is hands-on with clients."

"The lactation consultant was really short and did not help me. I became discouraged with that...No one encouraged me to keep breastfeeding."

PROVIDERS DO NOT HONOR FAMILIES THEY SERVE

by not listening, trusting, or centering Black families in their own lived birth and breastfeeding experiences.

FATHERS ARE EXCLUDED FROM THE ENTIRE BIRTH AND BREASTFEEDING PROCESS

In the health care and public health systems, through lack of support and resources centered on their experiences.

"I was asking questions, but was not given many answers. Procedures were being done [on] our child without consent. I tried to advocate and was not heard."

BARRIERS

CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES INTERFERES WITH HUMAN MILK FEEDING

by investigating, intimidating, and forcibly separating Black families.

"CPS was called on me before I was breastfeeding and pregnant at the time. My milk decreased a lot due to how stressed I was."

STRONG BEGINNINGS

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION

OVERALL, BLACK FAMILIES IN KENT COUNTY WANT TO HUMAN MILK FEED

LACTATION SUPPORT GROUPS FOR BLACK BIRTHING FOLKS AND SUPPORT PEOPLE CAN HELP BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNITY WITH OTHER BLACK FAMILIES

OPPORTUNITIES

IT IS VITAL THAT BLACK FAMILIES RECEIVE BIRTH AND LACTATION SUPPORT FROM TRUSTED FOLKS IN THE COMMUNITY WHO REFLECT AND REPRESENT WHO THEY SERVE (PEER)

REFERRALS AND COORDINATION WITH TRUSTED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS/PROGRAMS ARE NECESSARY TO ENSURE BLACK FAMILIES RECEIVE EXTENDED SUPPORT TO MEET THEIR HUMAN MILK FEEDING GOALS

PROVIDERS MUST LISTEN TO, TRUST, AND CENTER BLACK FOLKS, INCLUDING FATHERS SUPPORT PEOPLE, AND THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES

"Getting support with human milk feeding started with Strong Beginnings. Before that, I had [some] support, but not support for breastfeeding, because no one I [was] around actually had a human milk feeding experience."
- Kent County Expert Participant



THE DATA SUPPORTS THESE FINDINGS:



72.1%

Families in Kent
county initiated
breastfeeding

Source: State of Michigan,
"Michigan Breastfeeding Rate
Report." 2021.



Yet,
**breastfeeding
duration and
exclusivity rates
drop** due to
systemic barriers
as stated above.

"Continuous lactation support for families has been identified as a strategy to increase breastfeeding initiation and duration. **Using these principles, peer-led and community-based support groups for Black women have been created and received well by women and their families.**"

- Pyles et al., 2021.

Source: Pyles et al., "Breastfeeding Sisters That Are
Receiving Support: Community-Based Peer Support
Program Created for and by Women of Color."
Breastfeeding Medicine. 2021.



Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiative Step 10 states, “[to] coordinate discharge so that parents and their infants have timely access to ongoing support and care” to support breastfeeding.

Source: Baby-Friendly USA, The Ten Steps to Successful Breastfeeding, 2023.

Clinical providers should **connect families with appropriate, trusted community support** to ensure continuity of care



According to a CDC study, Black fathers are more involved in their children’s lives compared to other racial/ethnic groups.

Source: CDC, “Fathers’ Involvement With Their Children: United States, 2006-2010.” National Health Statistics Reports. 2013.

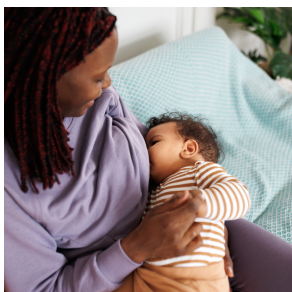
Black fathers are experts in their family’s needs and lived experiences, which can help to inform programming and policy change

"There is a common misconception that Black fathers are not engaged with their children. In the Strong Beginnings - Strong Fathers program, we center Black fathers, supporting them as they reclaim the narrative of Black fatherhood. We know their involvement is crucial in ensuring the safe birth of their babies and whether they are breastfed."

- Bonita Agee, BS, CLC, Strong Beginnings

WE ARE READY TO DELIVER.

We are ready to deliver building on the success of Strong Beginnings with expanded programming and partnerships of Corewell Health that are led by and center the experiences of Black families in Grand Rapids and the rest of Kent county, including:



Sustained funding commensurate with annual expenditures on other birth-related medical procedures from Corewell Health **to invest in clinical support and peer-to-peer programs that directly serve Black birthing and breastfeeding families** to improve outcomes



Black birthing folx, fathers, and support people being integral in leadership of any and all efforts around birthing and human milk feeding from strategy to implementation



A **system of continuous training, hiring, and equitably compensating of Black birth and lactation professionals** from and within Grand Rapids and the rest of Kent county

WRAP-UP EVENT

CHANGE MUST HAPPEN.

Tangible next steps and accountability are necessary to ensure that Black families in Kent county are listened to, respected, and centered. A Wrap-Up Event was virtually held on December 6, 2023 to share a preliminary report with participants to ensure that the report accurately reflected the meeting and discuss actionable, measurable next steps based on the main themes. Compensation and a meal gift card was provided to those who participated.

"Without the personal connection to Bonita, I probably would have said no to this invitation. I have already shared my experience in so many different forums and not much has changed. It adds salt to the wound to have to keep sharing painful and exhausting experiences and, to what end? **There has to be a measure of accountability otherwise it is a waste of my time."**

- Kent County Expert Participant



**26 RETURNING
PARTICIPANTS**



WRAP-UP EVENT

