

“Arkansas Mothers and Infants Deserve Better,” by Dr. Chris Jones

On August 27, the Biden-Harris Administration awarded the Arkansas Department of Health \$8.8 million to improve maternal health care statewide. This funding, part of the President’s White House Blueprint for Addressing the Maternal Health Care Crisis, comes at a crucial time for Arkansas.

The state ranks 3rd worst for infant mortality and 4th worst for maternal mortality. Black women in Arkansas are nearly twice as likely to die from childbirth complications compared to white women. Despite Governor Sanders' frequent claim that Arkansas is “the most pro-life state in the country,” the reality just does not line up.

One of the significant challenges is the lack of opportunities available to middle-income and poor citizens in Arkansas, often dubbed the “Land of Opportunity.” U.S. News and World Report ranks Arkansas 47th in overall state rankings, with similarly poor rankings in healthcare, economy, and education. These factors are directly contributing to the maternal and infant mortality crisis, and the situation is not improving under the current Sanders administration.

Doctors, researchers, and advocates generally agree on the root causes of the growing maternal and child health issues in Arkansas.

The Problems

A top concern is Arkansas’s high teen birth rate, nearly double the national average. Teenagers in the state lack proper education on contraception, and access to contraceptives is limited. The truth is, preaching abstinence has proven ineffective. The powerful sex drive in young people, coupled with the desire to please partners, often overshadows the logic of pregnancy and parenthood.

A Washington Post article highlighted that “lack of access to contraception is a major factor,” and reported that teens in Arkansas have unprotected sex at a rate 75% higher than the national average. The article also noted that giving birth in Arkansas, particularly in its rural southeast, involves more risks and less care.

More risks and less care!

Decreasing healthcare funding has further strained these issues. Many Arkansans are uninsured, and the Republican-controlled supermajority legislature and governor’s office have aggressively purged Medicaid rolls, severely affecting poorer citizens who need

healthcare the most. The rural areas are especially hard hit, with 22 rural hospitals at risk of permanently closing, representing nearly half of the state's rural hospital network.

Additionally, Arkansas's restrictive abortion laws have put obstetricians in a legally precarious position, forcing them to make challenging medical decisions that may discourage them from practicing in the state, especially in rural areas.

Solutions

The Biden-Harris administration's new funding is a step in the right direction, but Arkansas needs a more realistic approach. Young people, as well as expectant mothers and fathers, must receive proper education on pregnancy prevention and healthcare. Increasing the availability of obstetricians, nurse practitioners, and midwives, particularly in rural areas, is essential to saving lives.

Unfortunately, the Republican leadership appears more focused on cutting funds than addressing these urgent needs, which seems crazy to me.

What You Can Do

If you believe this situation is unacceptable (and crazy), contact your Congressional delegation and state legislators. Express your support for Biden-Harris \$8.8 million investment in maternal health and advocate for increased healthcare funding.

Also, if you have a personal experience related to the lack of rural hospitals, physicians, or emergency services, share your story. Together, we can change the harmful mindset in state government and create an environment of care for mothers, children, and healthcare providers.

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.