

Addressing the Problem of Premature Births -- December 2006

Since my days as a Governor of Delaware, when I learned that our state had the highest infant mortality rate in the nation, I have made the fight against infant mortality and prematurity a priority. As Governor, I initiated targeted and community based programs to reduce the state's high number of infant deaths by one-third from 1985 levels. Some of these programs include "Focus on the First 60 Months," "Smart Start," "Diamond Deliveries" for substance abusing pregnant women and "Tiny Steps" at the West End Neighborhood House in Wilmington.

Prematurity is a silent health crisis. Preterm delivery can happen to any pregnant woman, and in nearly one-half of the cases, no one knows why. But one thing we do know is that prematurity is the number one cause of infant mortality.

And unfortunately, infant mortality is on the rise again -- and Delaware's infant mortality rate is the 6th highest in the nation -- with an average of 9 deaths per 1,000 live births.

That is why I have been working in Congress to pass the so-called PREEMIE Act -- The Prematurity Research Expansion and Education for Mothers Who Deliver Infants Early Act -- which is designed to expand research into the causes and prevention of prematurity and to increase education and support services related to premature birth.

This new law will take important steps to reduce the rates of preterm labor and delivery and promote the use of evidence based care for pregnant women at risk of preterm labor and for infants born preterm with the ultimate goal of reducing infant mortality and disabilities caused by prematurity.

Specifically, the legislation, of which I was a co-sponsor includes the following provisions:

1. Expands federal research related to preterm labor and delivery and increasing public and provider education and support services.
2. Creates demonstration projects through HHS to educate health professionals and the public on the signs of preterm labor, good nutrition, smoking cessation, stress management, as well as programs to improve treatment and outcomes for premature babies.

3. Authorizes grants for Neonatal Intensive Care Unit Family Support programs for family counseling needs.

4. Calls for a Surgeon General's Conference to bring scientific and clinical experts from the public and private sector to formulate a national agenda on preterm labor and delivery.

I hope that this new law and the education and research that will follow will help to reduce infant mortality and the number of children who develop disabilities due to premature birth. With partnerships with organizations like the March of Dimes and Delaware's hospitals, I know we can work on this problem together.