

Baby Boxes

Ensuring newborns have a safe place to sleep after leaving the hospital is one way to help them get a healthy start in life and help parents avoid the tragedy of Sudden Unexpected Infant Death Syndrome.

On March 10, 2017, Ohio became the first Midwestern state (and the second overall, behind New Jersey) to begin providing that safe place by offering “baby boxes” to all new parents.

Baby boxes are a starter kit—a sturdy cardboard box filled with items a new baby needs, which can include clothing, diapers, food, bathing supplies, medical and parenting information, children’s books, or anything else the boxes’ providers care to add, along with a blanket and firm mattress that, once emptied, is a ready-to-go bed for newborns.

The idea originated in Finland in the late 1930s and was made universal there in 1949. Now the boxes are provided to all expecting mothers, but to get one, they must get a prenatal exam during the first four months of pregnancy. Baby boxes are credited with helping drop Finland’s infant mortality rate from 65 deaths per 1,000 births to 2.52 per 1,000 births.

New Jersey and Ohio offer them to parents-to-be, who must first complete an online education course at babyboxuniversity.com.

The program isn’t about the boxes *per se* but about education for new and first-time parents, said Dr. Kathryn McCans, chair of New Jersey’s Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board, which is tasked with identifying causes of deaths

and near-deaths in infants and children, their relations to governmental support systems, and ways to prevent them.

McCans said the idea to start a universal baby box program in New Jersey came from hearing about a 2016 Temple University Hospital pilot project in Philadelphia. A member of the review board’s Sudden Unexpected Infant Death Subcommittee brought it to the full board’s attention, and “that story got people thinking,” she said.

The program quickly became a public-private partnership of sorts: In November 2016, the Los Angeles-based Baby Box Co. told the board that with seed money, it could find funding to take universal baby box distribution statewide for 2017. The board then decided to tap \$40,000 from a safe sleep grant it had gotten from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to get started.

“Ideally, every baby born in New Jersey this year [105,000 births, based on historic data] would get their own box,” McCans said. “If we see a downtick [in SUIDS fatalities], I’ll consider it a success.”

Jennifer Clary, CEO of the Baby Box Co., said more than 12,000 people in New Jersey have completed the online education course since the program launched there on Jan. 25, 2017.

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About 30 states, including some in the Midwest, have inquired about launching similar programs, Clary said. The company is also running a similar program in Canada, in all provinces except Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

The company works with local hospitals and health care providers to produce 30-second to two-minute informational videos for the Baby Box University website. Expectant or new parents log in and get a syllabus tailored to their location, with videos featuring local experts (so someone in Cincinnati will see different videos than someone in Cleveland; urban parents will see different videos than rural parents).

Upon completing the program, parents get a certificate they can use to get a baby box at a designated pickup site or have it delivered directly to their home. In New Jersey, so far, it's about 50-50 between pickups and deliveries, Clary said.

Part of the program's success, she added, is that Baby Box University is a platform designed to reach millennial parents who primarily use cell phones or tablets to get information; anyone can access it from any browser-equipped platform.

In Wisconsin, the Children's Health Alliance of Wisconsin is taking a more targeted approach with a statewide pilot project launched in 2016 to put baby boxes, which they call "newborn nests," in homes. Trained volunteers provide the educational component, paired with home visits to help parents pick a location for the "nest," and ensure sleep safety. Follow-up visits are paid two weeks and two months after nest placement for evaluation.

Although slower than a statewide, universal program, project coordinator Amanda Bagin says the Children's Health Alliance prefers its approach because the efficacy and safety of the boxes and education can be better understood as the program grows.

There's not yet a lot of solid evidence about baby boxes in the United States and "if we can evaluate the program as it goes, we can provide that evidence," she said.

Partly because the volunteer training had to be done first, only 25 to 30 nests have been distributed since the summer of 2016, Bagin said. At least five local health departments are now getting the training for their own staffs so the program should grow faster through 2017, she added.

In Alberta, the nexus of parental education and baby boxes is also the focus of a province-wide study led by Karen Benzies, a nursing professor and associate dean of research at the University of Calgary, examining how supporting first-time mothers can help children get off to a better start.

A total of 563 mothers who were about six to eight months along in their pregnancies, and their "mentors" (a friend or family member) were recruited from late October 2015 through 2016. Questionnaires were given at the start, two months into the study and six months into the study. The study concludes in June, with results to be announced at end of July.

While baby boxes are part of Benzies' study, project coordinator Melody Loewen said the focus is on parenting mentoring and education—i.e., where to find resources and help.

"Yeah, you need a safe sleeping surface, but it's much more than that. It's the education and mentoring, too," Loewen said.

Clary of the Baby Box Co. said evidence from Finland shows the boxes have also reduced rates of post-partum depression and even child abuse, and her company will look over time to see if that result is duplicated here.

"There's very little bad you can say about helping keep babies safe," she said. "It's less political and more emotional. It's something we can all agree upon. Every parent deserves support."