

Breastfeeding: A Wellness Issue for African American Families

By Lisa Loving
Of *The Skanner News*

The Multnomah County Health Department last month held a special celebration commemorating news that Oregon has been named as the number one state for breastfeeding.

State nutrition workers credited Multnomah County's Women, Infant and Children's Program for pushing the local breastfeeding rate above 90 percent.

County and state officials met at the Northeast Health Center on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on Feb. 7 to congratulate local health workers; Multnomah County Commissioner Loretta Smith accepted a plaque from the state to honor the county's efforts.

The Skanner News this week caught up with Shafia Monroe of the International Center for Traditional Childbearing to talk about the one bad aspect of Oregon's breastfeeding trend – the fact that African American mothers suffer some of the worst birth outcomes and have the lowest rates of breastfeeding.

The Skanner News: Why is this a wellness issue that everyone should be paying attention to?

Shafia Monroe: We're doing well as a state but we're not doing well as a racial community – let me break it down, those communities would be Lake Oswego and Southeast Portland. But in terms of breaking it down by race we're not doing so well.

People should be really understanding why breastfeeding is not debatable. It's essential; it's a public health priority that saves lives on the mother's side and the baby's side and



Shafia Monroe



Last month Multnomah County and Oregon state officials celebrated reaching the highest breastfeeding rates in the nation. From left, Char McKay, Shantae Johnson, David Brown, Commissioner Loretta Smith, Diane Garrett and Loreen Nichols with the plaque honoring the work of health educators.

The black community should embrace women who breastfeed and make them feel comfortable in all areas, because that's the thing that we hear – where can I feed my baby?

the community's side.

I was talking to a pastor, he didn't know that mothers who breastfeed past one year, those women are less inclined to get breast cancer — that's documented. But we only hear people telling black women to get a mammogram—I've never heard anyone tell black women that if you breastfeed for one year it can reduce your breast cancer risk. So that's important.

Also we don't hear that women who breastfeed, it delays their diabetes. So if you get gestational diabetes when you're pregnant, I hate to quote another statistic, but you're prone to getting diabetes, I believe, within 5-6 years. By breastfeeding, it delays your onset of Type 2 diabetes. This can be major, when you have a high diabetic rate within the black community in Portland, and more black women dying from late-stage breast cancer.

We still want to make breastfeeding more acceptable in the normal life of African American families, so they feel there's no shame that comes from doing it.

And this is kind of philosophical, but with all this stress over the Trayvon Martin case – it's driving all of us crazy across the country. I think that, just to breastfeed your child does increase the endorphins for more peace and relaxation because we live in such a stressful situation, particularly mothers of African descent.

I don't want to say 'of color' because Mexican women are breastfeeding their babies better, data show that. African-born women are also successfully breastfeeding their babies past six months. And Asian women are. But African American women are not.

So I want to be very specific about African American women. Women who identify as African American need

more support, more information about the importance of breastfeeding. And breastfeeding for a long time – not just for a couple of weeks, but really looking to breastfeed until the small interior fontanel closes, which is the top of the head. It takes one year for what we call "the soft spot" to close because the brain has one year to grow. I tell moms, you have one year to give your child the best food possible for the best living development.

And of course if you can't breastfeed for medical reasons, medication, fine.

But it's important to understand too that breastfeeding is not just about putting breast milk in a bottle. It's an actual act. You're actually holding your baby, skin to skin, where the child has a certain distance from the mother's face. And the way the baby is in the arm – only God would know there is some kind of neural click that happens at that distance of a child looking into the mother's face. So just filling the bottle and giving it to Dad and propping it is not the same.

It's the whole thing – holding the baby, skin to skin, the baby smelling the mom, the heartbeat – all of that creates things that science is still trying to prove. And I feel that we really need to celebrate that more, I feel that we're in a state, thank God, where people are not being kicked out for breastfeeding at church or at the store. However we still want to make breastfeeding more acceptable in the normal life of African American families, so they feel there's no shame that comes from doing it. And that the black community would embrace women who breastfeed and make them feel comfortable in all areas, because that's the thing that we hear – where can I feed my baby? People feel that it's not a good thing to do; it's for us to break the stigma.

And also black people in this country, we have a strong breastfeeding history up to 1970 in the South. However, as we know that was eradicated by the formula industry for all people, but I think it made a very strong impact on African American women for many reasons.

We are holding an African American mothers breastfeeding circle for women to come into an accepting environment and support each other and learn more about the benefits. The schedule will be up on the website by Thursday for people to sign up.

Find out more about the International Center for Traditional Childbearing at www.ICTC.org

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