

Governor Phil Murphy

First Lady Tammy Murphy Highlights New Jersey's Progression in March of Dimes 2022 Report Card

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New Jersey Bucks National Trend as One of Only Four States to Improve U.S. Preterm Birth Rates

HACKENSACK – First Lady Tammy Murphy today joined representatives from March of Dimes and Hackensack University Medical Center to highlight New Jersey's progress in the 2022 March of Dimes report card in preterm birth rates, infant mortality, low risk cesarean section rates, and prenatal care. In a report that showed a national trend of worsening outcomes, New Jersey was revealed to be one of only four states that improved preterm birth rates – raising a grade from a C+ to a B-. When evaluating preterm birth rates – a key indicator of the health of both mom and infant – of the 53 states and territories evaluated, 47 worsened, one stayed the same, and only four improved: Montana, North Dakota, Kansas, and New Jersey.

From the early days of the Murphy Administration, First Lady Tammy Murphy recognized the crisis in maternal and infant health, particularly for women of color, and has made it her mission to address this epidemic head on. In 2019, First Lady Tammy Murphy launched Nurture NJ, a statewide program committed to reducing the maternal and infant mortality epidemic in New Jersey and ensuring equitable care among women and children of all races and ethnicities. In January of 2021, she unveiled the Nurture NJ Maternal and Infant Health Strategic Plan, with the goal of reducing New Jersey's maternal mortality by 50 percent over five years and eliminating racial disparities in birth outcomes. To date, Nurture NJ has already completed or made headway on over half of the more than 70 recommendations outlined in the plan, seen 43 pieces of maternal and infant health legislation signed by Governor Murphy, developed and implemented groundbreaking programs and policies, hosted annual Black Maternal and Infant Health Leadership Summits, and more – positioning New Jersey as a leader in fighting the maternal and infant health crisis.

"In New Jersey, I have spent five years listening to the cry for maternal justice grow louder from mothers who have lost their babies – or very nearly their own lives, fathers who have lost their life partners, and countless women of color who have told tragically similar stories; stories of not being listened to or receiving the care that they needed and deserved, at a time when they could not have been more vulnerable. I am optimistic that through the work of Nurture NJ we have started moving the needle by dismantling silos, building trust, developing groundbreaking policy, and amplifying the voices of the mothers affected by this crisis," said **First Lady Tammy Murphy**. "While I am thrilled to see our numbers progressing in the right direction, I am equally alarmed by the number of states which have declined. It is my hope that the ongoing efforts in New Jersey and the Nurture NJ Strategic Plan can serve as a model for all states. We must work together to continue to transform New Jersey into the safest and most equitable place in the nation to deliver and raise a baby, and our nation into a haven for mothers, babies, and families."

The national statistics, however, remain alarming. The report revealed that the U.S. preterm birth rate increased to 10.5% in 2021, earning the country a D+ grade in the Report Card. The data also shows persistent racial disparities across maternal and infant health measures that were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, making the U.S. among the most dangerous developed nations for childbirth.

The report shows that the number of preterm births increased from 364,487 to 383,082 for women of all races. Black and Native American women are 62% more likely to have a preterm birth and their babies are twice as likely to die as compared to White women. In 2021, preterm birth rates for Black mothers increased from 14.4% to 14.7% and increased from 11.6% to 12.3% for Native American/Alaskan Native mothers. What's more, while Asian women saw a 3% decline in births, they had the largest increase (8%) in preterm births compared to all other women.

The report also reveals that low-risk Cesarean births remain alarmingly high, with the highest rates among Black mothers (31.2%). Overall Cesarean delivery rates increased from 31.8% to 32.1% in 2021 and represent nearly one third of all births. While Cesarean birth is lifesaving in medically necessary situations, this form of delivery is a major surgery and does have immediate and long-term risks. With about eight in 10 maternal deaths now preventable according to the CDC, reducing rates of Cesarean births may reduce adverse maternal health outcomes associated with medically unnecessary Cesarean birth.

"We know that the pandemic impacted the way that providers delivered care. Low staffing, resource issues, and fears around COVID-19 transmission put added pressure on providers to get patients delivered and out of maternity units in a timely fashion, and may have also contributed to increases in use of obstetric interventions such as inductions and Cesareans," said **Dr. Zsakeba Henderson, Senior Vice President and Interim Chief Medical and Health Officer at March of Dimes**. "These interventions have also been shown to contribute to the rise in preterm births, especially late preterm births."

"We stand with First Lady Tammy Murphy and the March of Dimes in this important work," said **Lisa Tank, M.D., Chief Medical Officer, Hackensack University Medical Center**. "Our Cesarean delivery rates have been in a steady decrease for the past five years, falling to an overall rate of 19 percent last year, and our network of Hackensack Meridian *Health* hospitals have a delivery rate of less than 23 percent as compared to the state rate of 32.5 percent. We are proud of this achievement and our partnership with the March of Dimes to bring a support program to our NICU families."

"First Lady Tammy Murphy's Nurture NJ initiative has focused on improving the collaboration and programming among all departments, agencies, and stakeholders that are committed to making New Jersey the safest and most equitable place in the nation to give birth and raise a baby," said **Judy Aschner, MD, Chair of Pediatrics at Hackensack Meridian Children's Health and March of Dimes Board of Trustees member**. "The work we have done at Hackensack Meridian *Health* and Hackensack Meridian Children's Health speaks to our commitment to this goal. We remain vigilant and focused on the work we must all do to get to this goal."

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