



Bringing the *Baby First Advocates* Program into Your Community:

A Replication Guide

Program Overview

The Baby First Advocates (BFA) program is an innovative and effective grassroots advocacy project that recruits volunteers to educate community members about maternal and infant health issues. Baby First Advocates are mothers, fathers, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, sons, and daughters. Anyone who has a deep desire to improve the health status of individuals in their community can become an advocate.

The goals of the Baby First Advocates are to:

- Develop community education strategies
- Recruit potential clients into Indianapolis Healthy Start services
- Increase community awareness about infant mortality and maternal health issues
- Increase awareness of local health and social service programs

The Baby First Advocates accomplish these goals through door-to-door canvassing, working at health fairs, hosting community events, and partnering with faith-based organizations, beauty salons, businesses, laundromats, and community centers.

Baby First Advocates attend monthly meetings to receive ongoing training on key health messages that affect mothers, infants, and families—such as infant mortality, safe sleep practices, how to have a healthy pregnancy, safe sex, access to care, and postpartum depression. In addition to these monthly meetings, Baby First Advocates keep activity logs that track the type of activities completed, referrals provided, and numbers of people reached. Advocates are also given the opportunity to attend continuing education trainings and out-of-town conferences.

The Indianapolis Healthy Start Project, administered by the Marion County Health Department, serves as the lead coordinating organization for the Baby First Advocates program. Other key partners include the Minority Health Coalition of Marion County and the Indiana Perinatal Network.

Why Was the Baby First Advocates Program Started?

The Indianapolis Baby First Advocates program arose in 2004 in response to alarming health disparities in Marion County, including rising infant mortality and low birth weight rates, and late prenatal care entry among low-income and African-American women. Program planners recognized the need for unique, non-traditional strategies to access these typically hard-to-reach populations. Initial program collaborators identified zip codes with the highest incidence of social and medical risk for infant mortality and morbidity (such as preterm and low birth weight births) in which to focus the outreach and intervention activities.

Who Are the Baby First Advocates and What Do They Do?

Composition of the group

The current BFA group is comprised of nearly 30 volunteers ranging in age from 25 to 55+. While most are African American and women, some are Caucasian and men. All have been touched in some way by the issues the group addresses—such as having had a premature or stillborn infant, or knowing someone who did. BFA members include a salon owner, a pastor, and a barber. Each is committed to providing outreach, education, and advocacy to the underserved members of their community.

Philosophies and Values of the Baby First Advocates Program

The Baby First Advocates program, its volunteers, and its collaborators share a commitment to improving the lives and health of pregnant women, mothers, babies, and families through outreach and education. The following core values underlie the BFA program and are critical to its success.

Medical Underpinnings of the Program. The Advocates' health messages are all based on clinically sound, up-to-date research. This ensures that the program remains both medically credible and non-controversial, and that it is appropriate for and relevant to a wide range of audiences. The Indiana Perinatal Network's publication "How to Have a Healthy Baby" forms the basis of the Advocates' health messages and outreach. For at-risk and underserved women, adherence to these messages may be difficult, and they often face obstacles in complying with them. The Advocates translate these messages into practical, achievable suggestions, and refer community members to local resources for assistance.

Empowering Traditionally Marginalized People to Assume Leadership Positions. A key component of Advocates' success is that many of them live in underserved communities and understand firsthand the relationship between socioeconomic status and health disparities. Their ability to relate to the life circumstances of the people with whom they interact gives them credibility in the community. Through their participation in the BFA program, these Advocates are empowered to take leadership roles as change-makers, heightening their own self-esteem and serving as role models for other members of the community.

Matching the Message—and the Messenger—to the Community. Whether working with groups, businesses, churches, or individuals, Baby First Advocates recognize the importance of earning trust and respecting the other party's decisions, experiences, and values. "Know your audience" is one of the cardinal rules among the Advocates, who emphasize presenting the range of topics and resources, and then letting the other person choose what is of interest. A faith-based organization, for example, may not be interested in disseminating information about birth control, but might want to create a space where breastfeeding mothers can nurse and obtain information. Connecting with the group or individual's desire to support mothers and families creates a common ground and strengthens partnership.

In addition, matching the Advocate to the audience is also crucial. An Advocate who shares or can relate to the background and experiences of the group will be far more effective and credible than one who is of a different race, gender, age, or status.

Ownership of the Problem—and the Solutions. Advocates work with the collaborating agencies to identify health issues of concern as well as potential solutions. Together, they set the agenda for their activities and interventions, ensuring that the group's work is relevant to the neighborhoods the members serve. When interacting with community members, Advocates focus on problems and resources within the local area, connecting the issue to community members' lives and interests.

Activities

Baby First Advocate members host and participate in a variety of activities, many of which have evolved into much-anticipated neighborhood traditions. All BFA events have a focus on families and include activities for children. In order to attract participants, events include giveaways such as groceries, gift cards, clothing, and baby supplies. Advocates distribute flyers promoting the activities at schools, stores, churches, businesses, and other community agencies and venues.

During all BFA events and activities, Advocates wear nametags bearing the BFA logo and carry business cards with the Minority Health Coalition of Marion County contact information. When working in groups, Advocates recommend wearing the same shirts (or shirts of the same color) to distinguish the members.

BFA activities include...

- Canvassing. Using the high-risk zip code list and other local statistical information, advocates select apartment complexes or other gathering spots to canvas. Advocates walk door-to-door with information and referral lists, approaching residents and community members with their health messages, handouts, and resources.
- Community Baby Showers. Held in May, the annual BFA Baby Shower is one of its most popular and successful events. The Baby Shower is planned and organized in collaboration with prenatal care coordinators at local clinics and is known for its giveaways, raffles, and drawings. Giveaway items include diapers, car seats, infant and baby supplies and gear, gift cards, and educational materials. On-site workshops and presentations are offered throughout the event on topics such as safe sleep, car seat use, and shaken baby syndrome. Food is served, and representatives from area organizations promote their programs and services. Presentations are made to attending dads on the importance of fathers in a child's life. Past presenters have included representatives from All Pro Dad, the fatherhood group with which Colts coach Tony Dungy is actively involved.

- Community Block Parties. Traditionally held in early spring, the block party targets the neighborhood around the community center where BFA meetings are held. The block party has grown in size each year, and includes a health fair, food giveaway, clothes giveaway, children’s game and activity area, and a three-on-three basketball tournament. The concept of the block party is to pull residents from the neighborhood to the event with incentives, and to offer them health messages and services in a party atmosphere. Lasting four hours, the block party is held on a Saturday. Food is procured from a local food bank and bagged ahead of time. Clothes are collected ahead of time, as well. A punch card is given to each guest to be used at the health fair portion of the block party. Once guests have filled their cards, they can collect their food and go to the clothes giveaway. This ensures that the guests are receiving the health messages intended for them. The basketball tournament and children’s area adds to the diversity of attendees.
- Information and Resource Displays. Businesses and community organizations are strong BFA partners, and many welcome the opportunity to display health information, resources, and materials. Current businesses promoting BFA and its materials include local beauty salons and barber shops. Each commits to displaying materials and is “assigned” an Advocate who will visit regularly to replenish handouts and answer questions from the staff and patrons.

Accomplishments

Each year the Baby First Advocates program reaches thousands at-risk Indianapolis residents and conducts dozens of community outreach events

Members of the Baby First Advocates have also been invaluable in assisting with the Indiana Perinatal Network’s community-based research efforts, and were partners in holding “community conversations” with local residents on unplanned pregnancies and safe sleep practices.

Starting a Baby First Advocates Program in Your Community

Implementing a Baby First Advocates program is an innovative way to reach underserved and at-risk members of your community, to raise awareness about important health issues, and to promote local services and resources. The following guidelines will provide you with tips, suggestions, and issues to consider as you begin the planning process.

We all have a deep desire to help our fellow human beings.

- Indianapolis Baby First Advocates Member

Do We Need a Baby First Advocates Program in My Community?

Before you start getting a group together, assess your community and find out the data and statistics about maternal and infant health in your area. Developing this “statement of need” will help you identify outreach priorities, recruit partners, and secure funding. Articulating *why* the program is necessary is critical to getting other people on board.

What do I need to know, and how do I find it out?

Knowing answers to the following questions will help you better understand the health status of women and children in your community. You may be able to find much of it from your county health department, or from the maternal and child health division of the Indiana State Department of Health. Your local hospital is also a valuable source of information on health trends and data. You may also contact the Indiana Perinatal Network for assistance locating data trends in your area.

- *What is the fetal/infant death rate in your county/community? What are the most common causes of death? Where do the highest numbers of death take place? Have the rates and the causes increased, decreased, or stayed the same over the past few years?*

Understanding the causes of fetal/infant death will give you an idea of what kinds of education and outreach your Advocates should provide. For instance, “prematurity” is often identified as a top cause of death; premature births may arise as a result of late or no prenatal care, maternal substance use, domestic abuse, or high blood pressure. “Asphyxia” is another common cause of infant death, often due to unsafe sleep environments. Your Baby First Advocates can provide community outreach and education on these topics in an effort to prevent future such deaths from occurring.

- *What is the Low Birthweight (LBW) and Very Low Birthweight (VLBW) rate in your county/community?*

Knowing this information will also offer you guidance about important educational messages and services for pregnant women. Babies born at low or very low birthweights often face a host of physical and developmental problems, and mothers of these babies may wish to be connected to medical and social support services.

- *How many women in your county/community receive late or no prenatal care?*

Women who don’t receive prenatal care—or who begin to access care later in their pregnancies—are at risk for pregnancy-related complications and potential health problems for their babies. For low-income or at-risk women, accessing prenatal care and adhering to its numerous requirements and restrictions can be very difficult. Baby First Advocates frequently help connect women with free and

low-cost prenatal care, insurance and benefit resources, and information about nutrition and self-care during pregnancy.

➤ *Who are the at-risk populations in your community? Where are they located?*

Knowing where and with whom you want to work will be instrumental in recruiting your Advocates and planning programs. As discussed above, Indianapolis Baby First Advocates center their outreach efforts in seven zip codes that have the highest incidence of social and medical risk for infant mortality. Forming a strong relationship with your local health department and maternal/child health programs will assist you in determining in which zip codes, census tracts, or counties have poor health outcomes and where the greatest need for services and education exists.

Whom should I partner with to start and run the program?

The Indianapolis Baby First Advocates program is collaboratively managed by the Marion County Health Department's Healthy Start program and the Minority Health Coalition of Marion County, with support from the Indiana Perinatal Network. Collectively, these agencies provide data, training, and technical support to the Advocates. Forming strong partnerships with the public health and healthcare communities will give your program credibility and strengthen its infrastructure.

You don't want just anybody. You want people who are passionate.

- Indianapolis Baby First Advocate

How do I recruit and train Advocates?

Don't come with the master's degree. Use people who sound like them, who look like them. Use people who are chameleons.

- Indianapolis Baby First Advocate

Word of mouth is a sure strategy to recruit new members to the program. Your program partners may have suggestions for potential members, who in turn can recommend others. Contact local community organizations for suggestions, place ads in church bulletins, and ask around at neighborhood businesses (such as salons and barber shops) in the areas where you plan to focus. Host an informational recruiting meeting (be sure to provide food!) for potential Advocates at an area community center. Once you've identified a couple of passionate, dedicated Advocates, they will likely refer and recommend new members. Several of the Indianapolis Advocates are related—family members can be great referral sources!

What makes us so successful is the people who are Advocates.

- Indianapolis Baby First Advocate

Once you have assembled an initial group of members, you will want to schedule several sessions of training and planning with them. Remember, *they* have the credibility and connections in the

communities, so let them guide discussions about needs and outreach strategies. After you have completed your orientation and training, you will want to reserve part of each monthly meeting for on-going training and continuing education.

Possible training topics include:

- SIDS and safe sleep
- Breastfeeding
- The importance of prenatal care and how and where to access it
- Substance use during pregnancy
- Depression during and after pregnancy
- Recognizing the signs of preterm labor
- Shaken baby syndrome
- Access to care
- Safer sex
- Health disparities

How do I secure funding for the program?

Support for the Indianapolis Baby First Advocates project is provided in part by Indianapolis Healthy Start (IHS), which contributes the coordinator's salary and benefits, incentives for the Advocates (supplies, grocery store gift cards, etc.), event contributions (such as food, decorations, and giveaways), and health education materials and conference registration. In the past, IHS has sponsored trips for some of the Advocates to attend the National Healthy Start Association Meeting in Washington, DC.

If you need to secure outside funding, the following resources may be able to provide or recommend sources of financial assistance:

- Your local county health department
- Your local hospital's charitable foundation
- Area businesses that operate in the communities you plan to target
- Community group such as Kiwanis or Rotary International
- Local community foundations (see <http://tgci.com/funding.shtml>, and <http://www.indianagrantmakers.org/locator/>)
- Large churches that give community grants

How do I incorporate the key messages and values of the Baby First Advocates program?

As you begin to organize a Baby First Advocates program in your community, take time to think about the values and philosophies discussed previously and how you can make sure your program, its members, and its organizers reflect them.

1. *Working collaboratively with your Advocates.* Critical to the success of the program will be your ability to work collaboratively with the Advocates in identifying what issues affect the community, and outreach and education strategies to address them. While much of your plans and decisions will be influenced by the health data from your area, decisions about *how*, *when*, and *where* to engage the community should be made collectively. Remember, your Advocates will have first-hand knowledge, experience, and ideas. They will be an invaluable resource for you!
2. *Remember you are in someone else's environment.* Gaining people's trust and recognizing that you are entering *their* community is also an important key to your program's success. Program organizers and Advocates will need to be mindful of the attitudes, values, and experiences of community members. Your job is to present the information and resources and let them choose what course of action they are comfortable taking. As the Advocates get to know the people and programs in the areas, they will begin to build relationships and develop rapport with community members.
3. *Identify the "key people" in the community.* Finding your allies—people who support the program and can help you access your target populations—will make the process easier and more successful. These allies might include business owners, faith-based leaders, apartment complex managers, and other individuals who see what's going on in the community on a day-to-day basis. You and your Advocates should get to know them, raise their awareness about the issues the Advocates are working on, and get their input and participation.

If you would like further information, or if you have additional questions about the BFA program and how to get it started in your area, please contact

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