

First Born program saves costs, builds families

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A home visitation program for first-time mothers that was first started in Silver City nearly two decades ago has proven to be effective in reducing medical costs, according to a study released recently by the Rand Corp.

The New Mexico First Born program was started in Grant County by Vicki Johnson in 1997 as a result of a nursing shortage in the state, and is now in place in 17 counties, including Doña Ana and Luna.

It uses home visitors — typically social workers, nurse aides and child care providers, often coming from the community they serve — to work with new mothers on issues like nutrition, immunizations, breastfeeding and child safety. They also ensure the new mothers have access to federal programs like the Women, Infants and Children food and nutrition service.

There are typically a little more than two visits a month until the child's first birthday, and some parents get prenatal visits as well. The expectation is that information parents gain in caring for their first child can then be applied for all future children.

And it's working, according to the Rand report.

They studied 244 families in Santa Fe County for three years. Of those, 138 newborns were enrolled in the First Born program, and 106 were not. The study found that children enrolled in the program were 33 percent less likely to visit a hospital emergency room and 41 percent less likely to make nine or more visits to a primary-care clinic than were children who were not enrolled.

The program costs about \$3,400 a year per child, on average.

“These results demonstrate that it is possible to prevent costly health care use by using a staffing model that does not rely exclusively on nurses,” the study found. That is important, given the nursing shortage in New Mexico.

The 2015 annual report for the First Born Program in New Mexico lists multiple benefits to the program: 99 percent of families in the program had no substantial reports of child abuse and neglect; 98 percent had no domestic violence; 96 percent of newborns had a birth weight of more than 1,000 grams; 97 percent have current immunizations; and 100 percent of families report increasing their confidence in parenting.

All of these preventative measures bring substantial savings. For example, the cost for delivery and initial care for babies born at less than 1,000 grams can exceed \$100,000. The costs to our society from things like child abuse and domestic violence are immense.

The First Born program was named one of the nation's 10 most innovative and exemplary prevention programs by the Substance Abuse and Mental Services Administration and other collaborating federal agencies in 2002.

It was Benjamin Franklin who observed that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Making a small investment to help first-time parents get the help they need to start their children out on the right path will produce not just cost savings, but happier, healthier families.

That is a model that is worth sharing.

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