

Editorials

Editorial: 'First Born' visits making parenting, financial sense

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

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While the study on the New Mexico First Born program relies on a statistically small sample – just 138 newborns – the results could turn the tide not only for New Mexico families and taxpayers, but for their counterparts across the country. Because not having 138 newborns spend much of their first year unnecessarily in emergency rooms and doctor's offices improves the physical and financial health of families and the public.

The New Mexico First Born program was founded in Silver City in 1997 and has since been replicated in 16 other New Mexico counties. Funded by various private grants, the cost-effective program provides home visits to first-born children and their parents for one year to promote healthy child development.

It is a sad commentary that much of what First Born provides is the old-fashioned common sense and experience that grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and others historically shared with first-time moms and dads. Yet it is essential to fill that void if New Mexico is going to break its ongoing cycle of non-parenting that expects government to provide nearly everyone cradle-to-grave social programs.

The program does that at a cost of about \$3,400 a year per child.

In 2013, the Journal published a three-part series by investigative reporter Colleen Heild that found “over 15 years the state has pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into full-day kindergarten, prekindergarten, family nutrition initiatives, reading readiness programs, remedial classes for college, and increased salaries and training for teachers. Yet, New Mexico remains plagued by poor fourth-grade reading scores, high teen dropout rates, and disappointing numbers of college graduates each year.”

One key to breaking the cycle, the series reported, was home visits.

The Pew Center on the States says national research shows home visiting increases school readiness, cognitive development, parental engagement, parent-child bonding, and produces better maternal and infant health outcomes. In 2013 the federal government poured \$1.5 billion for such programs across the country and the New Mexico Legislature voted to quadruple the state's investment, from \$2 million to \$8 million.

There's no question the state needs to get a handle on its public health-care spending. Fully 82 percent of babies in this state are born into Medicaid-eligible families, an unsustainable fiscal model that means the public pays for all those ER, urgent care and doctor visits, whether they are needed or not.

Annual Medicaid spending in New Mexico is projected to exceed \$6.1 billion next fiscal year, with the state's share expected to increase about \$80 million, to just over \$1 billion.

First Born employs more than 100 home-visit personnel who educate new parents on things like immunizations, breastfeeding, checkups and child safety. It's cost pales in comparison to the cost of regular, unneeded visits to the ER and urgent care.

The study of 244 Santa Fe County families from 2011 to 2014 – 138 newborns in the program, 106 not – found the infants in First Born 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 their non-enrolled counterparts.

The results, published in the Dec. 15 online edition of the journal *Pediatrics*, “demonstrate that it is possible to

prevent costly health care use by using a staffing model that does not rely exclusively on nurses,” which are in short supply in New Mexico and much of the country.

While the study has a high margin of error because it is based on a small sample, it shows programs like First Born hold a promise for a healthier future. New Mexico and the nation should continue to evaluate such data-driven programs on a larger scale.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.