UAMS Receives $5 Million Grant to Reduce Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health

The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) received a five year, $5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to improve maternal health care in Arkansas.

The funding from Health Resources and Services Administration will help increase access to maternal and obstetrics care in rural communities and assist in tackling inequities in maternal health. It will also help implement the "White House Blueprint for Addressing the Maternal Health Crisis" in Arkansas.

About 700 women die each year during pregnancy or in the year after, according to HHS. Thousands of women each year have unexpected outcomes of labor and delivery with serious short- or long-term health consequences. Rural populations tend to have worse maternal health outcomes than individuals living in urban areas, and there are disparities experienced by racial and ethnic groups.

"Today, Black women are three times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause in this country than white women. That has to change," said HRSA Administrator Carole Johnson. "To make meaningful change, we need to center our work on the individuals and families we are serving. The Biden-Harris administration is committed to prioritizing equity and reducing the unacceptable disparities in maternal and infant health."

Arkansas ranks as one of the worst states in America for maternal health. In the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) 2018 comparison of 26 states with available data, Arkansas had the highest maternal mortality ratio. Multiple factors contribute to Arkansas' poor maternal health outcomes, including relatively high rates of poverty and large rural areas with limited obstetric care.

To help address the great need for maternal health improvement in Arkansas, UAMS will use the HHS funding to conduct the PeRinatal IMpRovement of Outcomes and Safety for Everyone (PRIMROSE) project.

"The PRIMROSE project will address critical gaps in data systems, health services availability and quality of care to improve maternal health outcomes and reduce disparities in Arkansas," said Jennifer Callaghan-Koru, Ph.D., associate professor at UAMS and the project's director.

An interdisciplinary team from UAMS and the Arkansas Department of Health with expertise in clinical care, evaluation research, informatics and health policy will lead activities in the following areas:
1) establishing a state maternal health taskforce and strategic plan;
2) strengthening data systems for maternal health surveillance
3) contributing to regionalization of perinatal care;
4) supporting patient engagement in quality improvement;
5) delivering evidence-based group prenatal care to disproportionately-impacted patients in maternity care deserts; and
6) preparing emergency providers in rural areas to respond to obstetric emergencies through simulation training.

To successfully complete these activities, Callaghan-Koru said, the PRIMROSE team will build on UAMS' strength in partnering with state agencies, health care organizations, providers and community-based groups across Arkansas. The team will also rigorously evaluate the implementation and outcomes of innovations to contribute to the evidence base for reducing maternal mortality.

"This is an important investment to help Arkansas become the healthiest place to give birth in the region," said Nirvana Manning, M.D., medical director for the PRIMROSE project.