

## Insights

# It Takes a Community to Save Babies

## Successful Strategies for Partnering with Communities of Color



NICHQ Project Director Stacy Scott, PhD, MPA

While sleep-related infant deaths are a public health issue across population groups, marked racial disparities exist: American Indian, Alaskan Native and non-Hispanic black babies are most likely to [die from sleep-related causes](#), and face the highest rates of [Sudden Unexpected Infant Deaths](#) (SUID). Eliminating these disparities requires doing more to raise awareness about infant safe sleep recommendations among communities of color, says NICHQ Project Director Stacy Scott, PhD, MPA. It requires community partnerships.

“As public health professions, we need to ask, ‘what else can we do to make sure safe sleep messages are well-received?’” says Scott. “And one of the first things we should look at is who delivers those messages.”

Talking to families about safe sleep recommendations in healthcare environments is critical, but it cannot be the only avenue for engaging communities of color, continues Scott, especially since conversations in hospitals may be fraught with mistrust stemming from historic trauma and implicit bias. By partnering with community programs and organizations, public health initiatives can give families opportunities to learn about safe sleep from trusted members of their community who share their lived experience.

Scott has seen the success of these partnerships first-hand. While working with the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), she helped spearhead the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporate Safe to Sleep Initiative, and

currently works with fraternity sponsored community events in every region in the country. As a project director for NICHQ, she leads multiple initiatives leveraging community-based partnerships to spread safe sleep messages to at-risk populations, including the National Action Partnership to Promote Safe Sleep ([NAPSS-IIN](#)), funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration Maternal and Child Health Bureau. Here, Scott shares six strategies she has successfully employed to engage community partners, maintain that partnership and collaborate to raise awareness.

### **1. Know the facts**

When approaching a potential community partner, spend time explaining why your initiative matters and why its success depends on community partnerships. Bring relevant SUID statistics that show its prevalence among families of color. Explain that helping more families understand safe sleep practices can change these numbers, and that community partners are best positioned to reach more families. Providing the science and sharing the context of these statistics while reiterating the need for their support can help convince organizations to join the cause. Moreover, arming them with accurate, up-to-date information will ultimately help support their work to spread awareness.

### **2. Be prepared to ask and answer tough questions about capacity**

There are multiple costs associated with a public health initiative, both in terms of time and money. This means that not all organizations have the capacity to join, no matter how capable their staff, or how well their goals match the goals of the initiative. Talk to potential partners openly about their capacity: how many staff do they have? What programs and activities are they already committed to? How much time and money could they reasonably commit to this work?

Their answers will help you decide if they have the capacity to meet your initiative's demands. If they don't, it doesn't preclude them as partners. Instead, work with them to develop a capacity and sustainability plan, one that offers deliverables that account for their restraints, and connects them with supportive resources and services.

### **3. Engage partners early in defining your strategy**

Involving community partners early in an initiative not only encourages buy-in, but it ensures your messages and outreach strategy are relevant to the community you're engaging. Bring community partners to the table when you're still setting your goals and strategic vision and ask them about their opinions. Remember to respect their restraints though, cautions Scott. Not all organizations will have the capacity or resources to support the planning phase, but they can still contribute ideas later in the process. For example, if an organization joins during the outreach and dissemination phase, share the proposed plan and then ask them if they have additional ideas you may not have considered.

### **4. Be flexible, committed and persistent**

Sustaining a strong partnership require continuous cultivation. Prioritize transparency and communication by scheduling standing meetings or calls with the organization's leadership to share updates on progress and next steps. When making decisions, always refer to your mission

and vision, so that everyone feels a shared sense of purpose. And be flexible: community attitudes, local political structures, available staff, and financial resources can quickly change, so be patient and prepared to work with your partner to navigate the changing landscape of their organization.

#### **5. Remember, one message does not fit all**

Different people come with different backgrounds, cultural expectations and beliefs. Community organizations working on the ground will benefit from support on how to tailor messages and concepts to the different audiences they are trying to reach. For example, if an organization is doing outreach to fathers, equip them with messages and images that show how fathers, specifically, can help support infant safe sleep. Similarly, help your community partners prepare for pushback from families who've learned that babies sleep best on their stomach or side; talk with them about respecting cultural beliefs, while describing the evidence and latest recommendations.

#### **6. Identify affordable, yet effective, communication vehicles**

Most community programs won't have the funding or time to develop sophisticated advertising campaigns. Instead, work with them on targeted and affordable awareness building efforts that leverage existing resources, such as by sponsoring a safe-sleep focused event during a traditional community observance. For example, in Detroit, Scott describes how local churches promoted "SIDS Sunday" to educate congregations about the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Participating churches distributed bulletin inserts and church fans with information on safe sleep practices, and the pastors spoke about SIDS and risk-reduction strategies. Similarly, you might reach out to barbershops, beauty salons, sports clubs, and other community sites, and provide handouts about infant safe sleep for them to distribute to clients or during events. Finally, Scott recommends writing articles and opinion pieces for local newspapers, which are often looking for new ideas.

Interested in hearing more from Scott? Read [her article on addressing safe sleep disparities](#) through conversations based in mutual trust.