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Dr. Janet Seabrook, executive director of Community Healthnet, discusses solutions for infant mortality Friday at a meeting of the NWI Health Disparities Council at Avalon Manor in Hobart.

Officials probe problem of NWI infant death rate

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HOBART — In 2016, 623 Indiana babies died before their first birthdays. Sixty-nine of those deaths happened in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

Representatives of local hospitals, health clinics and social service agencies met with state officials Friday to discuss how to solve one of the state and region's most intractable public health problems: infant mortality.

"It's the window to the soul of what we are about," Dr. Jennifer Walthall, a Valparaiso native and director of the Indiana Family & Social Services Administration, said at the meeting of the Northwest Indiana Health Disparities Council at Avalon Manor. "If you can protect your most vulnerable, you can protect everybody else."

Indiana has the seventh-highest infant mortality rate in the nation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Three of the 10 Indiana ZIP codes with the highest rate of babies dying are in Lake County: two in Hammond, the other in East Chicago.

Officially, the leading causes of infant deaths are premature birth, birth defects and sudden-infant death syndrome. But the risk factors go deeper.

"It's not just looking at 'how's your pregnancy?'; it's 'how's your life?'" said Denise Dillard, coordinator member of the Health Disparities Council and chief of advocacy for Methodist Hospitals. "Where do you sleep at night? Are you transient? What do you eat? During the day, are you eating flamin' hots and a cup of sugar?"

Dillard said she was pleased that Walthall and State Health Commissioner Kristina Box both



Tameka Warren, nurse supervisor for Nurse-Family Partnership of Lake County, speaks about infant mortality Friday.



LEFT: Dr. Jennifer Walthall, director of the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, speaks Friday at a meeting of the NWI Health Disparities Council at Avalon Manor in Hobart.

understand the "social determinants of health," things like the type of neighborhood you live in, your access to healthy food and safe housing, your economic security. Both women are also physicians who worked with women and infants: Walthall as a pediatrician, Box as an OB-GYN specialist.

After her speech, Walthall went from table to table to find out what more her agency could do to save the youngest residents of Northwest Indiana.

Walthall said she hoped to reach women earlier in life be-

cause the healthier a woman is the better the odds are she has a healthy pregnancy. Walthall gave as an example a 19-year-old woman she cared for early in her career who lost a baby.

"What if instead of finding her with an infant death at age 19, we found her at the age of 3?" Walthall said. That way, the woman could get the supportive services she needs to have a good education, a successful career, a planned pregnancy, Walthall said.

"That's the vision we have for Indiana, and it's possible."