Context: Infant mortality is one of the most entrenched racial health disparities in the United States. The black infant mortality rate (BIMR), at 13.4 per 1,000 live births, is nearly 2½ times the rate for whites. In Wisconsin, the BIMR of 15.2 per 1,000 is nearly 3 times the rate for whites. However, in Dane County, WI, the BIMR declined significantly from 1990 to 2007 (from 19.4 to 6.4 per 1,000), virtually erasing the black-white disparity. This extremely rare occurrence captured national attention and raised hopes for new understandings for evidence-based practice that could create similar outcomes in other cities.

Objective: The objective of this study is to develop an organizational systems-level understanding of the factors associated with the decline in the BIMR in Dane County. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the impacts of changes in organizational programs and policies and changing relationships between organizations as they impact mothers’ ability to access health services, information, social services, and other resources of importance for assuring positive birth outcomes.

Design: Semi-structured interviews with representatives of relevant Dane County organizations to elicit information about the organization’s history and perceived role in the systems of care that have impacted birth outcomes.

Setting: Dane County, WI.

Participants: Representatives of organizations (nonprofit, public and private) in Dane County involved in health care delivery and social services of particular relevance to expecting women and new mothers.

Results: We will report preliminary findings from Phase I.

Conclusions: Our hypothesis is that innovative community outreach and effective, multi-disciplinary/multi-agency preconception/prenatal coordination and care were the key drivers of improved African American birth outcomes. We expect that results will provide insights into the most important dimensions of organizational characteristics, capacity, and relationships as they relate to mothers’ ability to access services and resources important for assuring healthy birth outcomes.