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Report finds executive and House budgets could make infant mortality in Ohio worse

Ohio's infant mortality rate remains high while the nation's is dropping, and lawmakers are proposing changes to Medicaid that would make it worse, a new Policy Matters Ohio report finds.

Preterm birth is a leading cause of death of infants less than a year old, but it can be addressed through better maternal health care before, during and after pregnancy. Many of the risk factors for preterm delivery like chronic disease, poor nutrition, addiction or infection, can be mitigated through access to a doctor's care. Yet Ohio's lawmakers are considering provisions that would limit such access for poor and low-income working women.

"The infant mortality rate measures if Ohio babies make it to childhood," said Wendy Patton, report author and senior project director for Policy Matters Ohio. "By that measure, Ohio's doing badly. Our infant mortality rate was 47th among the states and District of Columbia in 2011, worse than almost every state and worse than it used to be. We're headed in the wrong direction."

Ohio has established a foundation for improving the infant mortality rate. Medicaid, which provides health care to poor and low-income workers and their families, was expanded to serve people making up to 138 percent of poverty (about \$22,000 a year for a mother with one child). Pregnancy care, family planning and treatment for breast and cervical cancer are available to women making up to 200 percent of poverty (about \$32,000 for a woman with a child). These treatments improve the health of mothers and babies.

But provisions in the state budget for the next two years would reverse that strategy. The Kasich budget reduces Medicaid eligibility for pregnancy, family planning and cancer. The House budget imposes new costs on Medicaid enrollees and suspends health care for 12 months with missed payments or paperwork. These provisions would make care harder to get and maintain for low income women, those most at risk for infant mortality.

"The Senate can help reduce Ohio's terrible problem of high infant mortality," said Patton. "They must retain Medicaid reforms established to protect the health of Ohio's most vulnerable women and children."

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*Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute
with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.*