Breast milk provides the ideal nutrition to promote optimal infant development. It is comprised of the perfect mix of fats, proteins, minerals, and vitamins to help infants thrive and creates stronger, healthier, smarter children. It is a natural, healthy, sustainable, free food source that is recognized worldwide as key to promoting the best child health. Despite these benefits, Mississippi has some of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the country, currently 47th out of 50 states. Not only does this low breastfeeding rate continue to exacerbate Mississippi’s growing health problems, but it also costs the state millions of dollars every year in avoidable healthcare costs, lost wages, and purchased formula. Promoting breastfeeding and increasing breastfeeding rates are an essential public health strategy for the state of Mississippi. This brief will examine the benefits and current barriers to breastfeeding in Mississippi, and legislative solutions to address Mississippi’s low breastfeeding rates.

WHY BREASTFEED?

Breastfeeding provides an amazing, unparalleled array of lasting health benefits to both mother and child. Not only does breast milk protect infants from a vast range of illnesses, but its far-reaching health effects can have positive implications into adulthood. In children, breastfeeding has been linked to a reduced risk of diabetes, certain forms of cancer such as leukemia, bacterial and viral infections, and better long-term dental health. Perhaps most importantly for Mississippi, breastfeeding is linked to substantially lower rates of obesity. Breastfeeding also reduces incidences of many respiratory illnesses, such as asthma and allergies, as well as significantly decreases an infant’s risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Breastfeeding has also been linked to increased IQs in children as well as stronger, closer parental bonds between mother and child.
Variation due to duration of breastfeeding and family history

Further, breastfeeding provides a number of significant maternal health benefits. Breastfeeding can reduce a mother’s risk of breast cancer by up to 28 percent, as well as lower their risk of developing uterine and ovarian cancer. Mothers who breastfeed have lower incidences of type 2 diabetes, and a reduced risk of developing osteoporosis. Breastfeeding has also been shown to decrease the occurrence of postpartum depression as well as reduce rates of obesity by increasing postpartum weight loss.

Economic Benefits

In addition to providing numerous health benefits to mother and child, breastfeeding is a large, across-the-board, cost saver and increasing breastfeeding rates within Mississippi would have significant economic implications for the state. Infant formula costs the average family between $1200-1500 per year. Families that breastfeed not only save these direct costs, but also further save healthcare costs and lost wages due to reduced child illness and care. Indeed, a study reported in the Journal of Pediatrics found that for every 1,000 babies that are not breastfed, there are 2,033 more medical visits, 212 extra days of hospitalization, and 609 additional prescriptions in an infant’s first year of life.

Increasing breastfeeding rates within Mississippi would also result in significant savings for the state. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, a minimum of $3.6 billion would be saved annually in medical expenses if 50 percent of American children were breastfed for the first six months of life. If 90 percent of children in the United States were exclusively breastfeed, an estimated $13 billion annually could be saved from reduced direct and indirect healthcare costs. Based on population numbers, that would roughly translate to a savings of between $36-130 million a year for Mississippi, although this number would most certainly be higher considering the state’s low breastfeeding rates and significant public health challenges. Moreover, Mississippi’s economy would also benefit from this increased child health through increased worker productivity and decreased absenteeism from parents.

Breastfeeding is not just healthy, but it is also completely free. Increasing breastfeeding rates in Mississippi would save individual families, as well as the state, a significant amount of money.

Increasing Breastfeeding Rates in Mississippi Could Save the State Between $36-130 Million Annually, and Likely Even More.

All the Experts Agree

Health organizations across the nation and the globe agree on the importance and necessity of breastfeeding. The following organizations all recognize breast milk as the best form of infant nutrition and recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of a child’s life for optimal health:

The World Health Organization
American Public Health Association
UNICEF
The United States Surgeon General
American Academy of Pediatrics
American Academy of Family Physicians
American Congress of OB/GYNs
American Dietetic Association

Formula Costs the Average Family Between $1200-1500 Per Year
BARRIERS TO BREASTFEEDING

Despite the known benefits of breastfeeding, barriers still exist that prevent mothers from initiating and/or continuing to breastfeed their child. These barriers, including lack of paid maternity leave and insufficient workplace and hospital policies, generally boil down to two central challenges: lack of knowledge and lack of support.

Lack of Knowledge

Many mothers lack the necessary information about breastfeeding. Often, women are ill-informed about the benefits of the practice as well as their rights as a breastfeeding mother. One study found that only 25 percent of the U.S. public agreed that feeding a baby formula, instead of breast milk, increased the child’s chance of illness. Indeed, many people, including health professionals, believe that formula is equivalent to breast milk in regards to nutrients and health benefits. Further, information about breastfeeding is often not provided to mothers in prenatal visits and most Mississippi hospitals lack an infant feeding policy that supports breastfeeding. Because of this, many mothers are not able to make informed decisions around the choice to breastfeed. Even if mothers are informed about the benefits of breastfeeding, they often lack knowledge about their rights as a breastfeeding mother. Although states, like Mississippi, provide certain rights to breastfeeding mothers, many women are unaware of these rights and are left without the tools to advocate for themselves and their children in public, medical, and workplace environments which threaten their breastfeeding relationship. Mothers that are more informed about the benefits of breastfeeding are much more likely to breastfeed and mothers who are knowledgeable about their rights are much more empowered to advocate for themselves.

Lack of Support

In addition to lack of knowledge, Mississippi mothers often lack the support necessary to create and maintain optimal breastfeeding practices. This support comes in many forms, from increased lactation services, to workplace accommodations for breastfeeding mothers, to creating a state-wide culture of support and acceptance around breastfeeding. Breastfeeding, at least in its initial stages, can be difficult, and without crucial support from their families, communities and the state, mothers may become frustrated and either give up or be unable to continue breastfeeding.

Creating cultural acceptance and support of breastfeeding is especially key. In a 2011 report on Breastfeeding, the Surgeon General highlighted embarrassment and social norms as two of the major barriers to breastfeeding. Infant formula has become the norm in many places, such as Mississippi, and social pressures for mothers to cover up or hide themselves while breastfeeding makes mothers feel embarrassed and fearful of being stigmatized. While Mississippi does have a law which allows women to breastfeed in public, it does not include a remedy which means there is no way to enforce this law. So, if a mother’s right to breastfeed is restricted, she has no available recourse. This only serves to further discourage women from breastfeeding.

MANY MISSISSIPPANIANS DON’T REALIZE THE NUMEROUS BENEFITS OF BREASTFEEDING
Breastfeeding Rates in Mississippi

Despite the multitude of benefits that breastfeeding provides, Mississippi has some of the lowest breastfeeding numbers in the country. Mississippi breastfeeding rates are 25 percent lower than the national average and the state’s six-month exclusive breastfeeding rates, as recommended by most health organizations, are almost 50 percent lower than the national average.\(^1\)

Increasing breastfeeding rates is especially imperative in Mississippi because the benefits of this practice specifically address many of the existing and expensive health issues that have long plagued the state. Mississippi has the highest adult and childhood obesity rates in the country.\(^20,\)\(^21\) Mississippi also has the highest rate of infant deaths per year as well as the highest rates of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.\(^22,\)\(^23,\)\(^24\) Breastfeeding would help to address all of these health problems. Breastfeeding has been shown to reduce the risk of obesity in both children and adults, which in turn reduces incidences of cardiovascular disease in later life.\(^5\) Breastfed babies are less likely to get diabetes and have a significantly lower risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, which would address a portion of Mississippi’s alarming infant mortality rate.\(^5\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BREASTFEEDING RATES IN MISSISSIPPI VS. THE NATIONAL AVERAGE</th>
<th>(^1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infants that are ever breastfed</strong></td>
<td><strong>National Average</strong> 79.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infants that are exclusively breastfed at 3 months</strong></td>
<td><strong>National Average</strong> 40.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infants that are exclusively breastfed at 6 months</strong></td>
<td><strong>National Average</strong> 18.80%</td>
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Indeed, WHO has stated that exclusive breastfeeding would have the “largest potential impact on child mortality of any preventative intervention.”\(^25\) Though Mississippi faces a number of significant health issues, efforts to increase breastfeeding rates across the state would be an important step towards addressing these crippling disparities.

In order to increase breastfeeding rates within the state, Mississippi needs to promote education and create support around breastfeeding. Public policy is the first step in making this change. Not only can policy empower mothers with information, rights and protections, it can also serve to send an overall message that Mississippi’s leaders support breastfeeding and breastfeeding mothers. This summer, the State Senate passed a resolution recognizing the benefits of breastfeeding and called upon employers, hospitals, and citizens to take steps to support breastfeeding mothers. Building upon these efforts, the following bills attempt to take further, incremental steps towards supporting and promoting breastfeeding in order to increase breastfeeding rates in Mississippi.
HB 756

HB 756 is intended as both an education and empowerment tool for breastfeeding mothers. In 2006, Mississippi passed a public breastfeeding law (Miss. Ann. Code 17-25-9) which allows mothers to breastfeed openly in any space they are authorized to be in. However, the law lacks an enforcement provision when this right has been restricted. HB 756 provides mothers with recourse against such violations. The consequences outlined are minimal, and include a fine ranging from $25 for a first offense, up to $250 for a third offense. The fine is not intended to be punitive, but rather to serve as a teaching tool to inform and remind uneducated establishments that they may not restrict a mother’s right to breastfeed. HB 756 will further serve to empower mothers to exercise their rights and avoid shame and embarrassment, which is often highlighted as a barrier to breastfeeding, felt by mothers who are asked to cover up or hide their breastfeeding. By addressing these barriers, Mississippi can clear the way for more mothers to breastfeed and ultimately increase breastfeeding rates.

Bill Basics

An addendum to Miss. Ann. Code 17-25-9, which allows women to breastfeed anywhere, public or private, that they are otherwise authorized to be, adding an enforcement provision to the existing language.

Outlines a fine structure to be imposed upon written complaints of violations of the law:

- $25 fine for a first offense
- $125 fine for a second offense
- $250 fine for a third offense, and every offense thereafter

Fine will only be imposed after establishment has received notice and refuses or fails to comply.

HB 757

HB 757 is another education and empowerment tool for breastfeeding mothers in Mississippi. As outlined above, prenatal education about breastfeeding is crucial to increasing breastfeeding rates and unfortunately many health professionals do not provide this information. Further, mothers are often ill-informed about both the benefits of breastfeeding as well as their rights as a breastfeeding mother. Mississippi laws, as well as individual hospital policies, provide certain rights and protections around the practice of breastfeeding. However, mothers are often unaware of these policies so even if they do want to breastfeed, they are not equipped to advocate for themselves and their infants. The goal of HB 757 is to address this educational disparity. HB 757 requires all places that provide maternal care, such as OB/GYN and hospital offices, to display a Breastfeeding Mothers Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights, with text created in collaboration with the Mississippi State Health Department, outlines some of the key benefits of breastfeeding, as well mother’s rights as they pertain to breastfeeding.

Bill Basics

Creates a Breastfeeding Mothers Bill of Rights, which outlines the key benefits of breastfeeding as well as the rights of a breastfeeding mother in Mississippi, including:

- Mothers have the right breastfeed in public and cannot be penalized by the law for breastfeeding.
- Mother have the right to ask hospitals not to give their baby formula, unless medically necessary, and ask that their infant be brought to them for regular feedings.

Places that provide maternal care are required to display this Breastfeeding Mothers Bill of Rights in a prominent, visible area on their premises such as a lobby and/or waiting room. A template of the Bill of Rights will be created by the Health Department and be available on their website for maternal care facilities to use.

Intervening at this level is especially important. A recent study found that similar laws to HB 757 not only increase maternal awareness surrounding breastfeeding, but also promote more buy-in and support from hospital personnel regarding breastfeeding. In places in which similar laws have been enacted, hospitals and hospital personnel were much more likely to implement policies and procedures that promoted breastfeeding.

Increasing breastfeeding rates in the state is imperative to promoting better public health within Mississippi. Breast milk offers Mississippi infants with optimal nutrition right from the start and provides a multitude of important and long lasting benefits for literally no cost. Not only will increasing breastfeeding rates improve the state’s health, but it will reduce individual and state expenditures. It is important for Mississippi to take action towards increasing breastfeeding rates within the state. HB 756 and HB 757 are an important step towards this goal and require your support!
10. Allison Stuebe et al., Duration of Lactation and Incidence of Type 2 Diabetes, 294 JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION 2601, 2607 (2005).
13. Thomas Ball et al., Care Costs of Formula-feeding in the First Year of Life, 105 PEDIATRICS 870, 870 (1999).
17. SURGEON GENERAL supra note 2 (citing G.E. Gibson, Getting Back to Basics: The Curious History of Breastfeeding in the United States, 105 AN J NURSING 72c, 72c-73c (2005)).
18. SURGEON GENERAL supra note 2 (citing J.A. Scott and C.W. Binns, Factors Associated with the Initiation and Duration of Breastfeeding: A Review of Literature, 7 BREASTFEEDING REV. 5, 5-16 (1999)).