

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Health

FROM: Christopher Mackie, Medical Officer of Health

DATE: 2013 May 16

SMART START FOR BABIES: IMPROVING OUTCOMES

Recommendation

It is recommended that Report No. 070-13 re “Smart Start for Babies” be received for information.

Key Points

- Smart Start for Babies Program provides prenatal and nutrition education for vulnerable pregnant women and teens in London and Middlesex County.
- Significant changes were made to the program in 2012 and the program continues to evolve.

Background

Smart Start for Babies (SSFB) is a Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program designed for pregnant women and teens who are at risk for poor birth outcomes due to factors such as poor lifestyle habits, abuse, poverty, recent arrival in Canada, and teen pregnancies. The woman’s primary support person can also access the program. The program is funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and as the sponsor, the Health Unit provides in-kind support in the form of staff to coordinate and facilitate the program. SSFB has been sponsored by the Health Unit for the past eight years with experienced public health nurses and registered dietitians facilitating the sessions. The program also receives significant in-kind personnel support from London Health Sciences Centre, Merrymount Family Support and Crisis Centre, Children’s Aid Society London & Middlesex (CAS), and Health Zone Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinics. The program provides access to healthy foods, nutritional counseling, training for life skills, prenatal education, and referrals to available community supports and resources.

Sessions provide prenatal and nutritional education and address priority issues of healthy weights, mental health promotion, and injury prevention. At each SSFB session, participants are provided with a healthy snack. Every three months dietitians engage participants in cooking a healthy meal. Participants in SSFB receive \$10 in food vouchers each week to promote access to healthy food, as well as bus tickets, prenatal vitamins, and a variety of kitchen utensils and cookware to support the preparation of healthy meals at home. Special projects held twice a year provide participants with slow cookers and Magic Bullet food processors. The Kiwanis Club of London donated \$1500 to SSFB in 2012 to purchase 63 slow cookers. In the fall of 2012, SSFB was able to access the Harvest Bucks program (see [Report No 065-13](#) in this Board of Health package) and participants received vouchers for fresh produce at a local farmers’ market.

Program Structure

Following an extensive evaluation process, a number of changes have occurred over the last year in the local SSFB program. Since September 2012, the SSFB program has increased the number of sessions offered to participants by offering sessions weekly instead of twice a month. This allows participants to enter the program later in their pregnancy and still derive nutritional, social, and educational benefits from the program. SSFB is now able to offer 42 sessions per year at seven sites compared to 24 sessions at four sites

in previous years. In the first six months of the new program structure, there were 73 new participants, representing an 89% increase over the same period for the previous year. Promotion of the program through the creation of a new logo, poster, and bookmark has been successful in recruiting new participants to the program. Promotional materials have been distributed to community agencies and to physicians in London and Middlesex County. SSFB has also created a new display which has been used to promote the program at various community events.

The SSFB prenatal and nutrition education curricula have been revised and updated to meet the Baby Friendly Initiative (BFI) criteria (see [Report No. 069-13](#) of this Board of Health package). To further support breastfed infants, participants now receive a \$20 voucher to purchase Vitamin D for their breastfed babies.

New Partnerships

Since September 2012, three new partnerships have been established to support SSFB. CAS partnered with SSFB to begin offering sessions to CAS clients. The Health Zone Nurse Practitioner-Led Clinic also began offering sessions in partnership with Chelsea Green Children's Centre Inc. As well, in March 2012, SSFB partnered with three Ontario Early Years Centres and the South London Community Centre to provide space and to hire site coordinators who support participants in the program. Site coordinators offer consistency to participants by being present each week to welcome participants to sessions, to foster relationships, to engage participants in the preparation of healthy snacks and clean up, and to link participants to appropriate community resources.

Recognizing that teens have particular needs, the Health Unit teen prenatal education classes are now linked with SSFB. Two SSFB sessions are held for teens each week. Twice a year, teens are able to attend a Teen Prenatal Fair organized by the SSFB Program Coordinator. Agencies which offer services specifically geared to teens are invited to attend the fair with a display and provide a brief presentation.

Conclusion

Smart Start for Babies has a long history in London and Middlesex County. It has been sponsored by the Health Unit for the past eight years with experienced public health nurses and registered dietitians facilitating the sessions. Pregnant women and teens who face barriers to accessing healthy foods are able to learn valuable life skills and improve their nutritional well-being which results in healthy birth outcomes. The program continues to grow and evolve to provide excellent nutrition and prenatal education to this vulnerable population.

This report was prepared by Ms. Kathy Dowsett, Manager, Family Health Services, and Ms. Nancy Del Maestro, Public Health Nurse and Smart Start for Babies Program Coordinator.

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This report addresses the following requirements of the Ontario Public Health Standards: Reproductive Health Program, to support healthy pregnancies. It also addresses the strategic direction of the Middlesex-London Health Unit to reduce health inequities for vulnerable populations.