

Durham Connects with new moms and dads



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Brian LeTourneau, director of the Durham County Health Department, kicks off the Durham Connects celebration Friday.

Parents get a hand with health

Public-private Duke initiative to offer nurse visits to every infant in county

BY MATTHEW E. MILLIKEN
mmilliken@heraldsun.com; 419-6684

DURHAM — What kind of impact will a new program offering free in-home nurse visits for every family with a newborn infant have on Durham County?

The founders of Durham Connects hope to be able to tell you how much impact in great detail in a few years.

The project's main goals are "to promote child development and child well-being, and we will measure that rigorously," said Ken Dodge, head of Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy.

County statistics and tests

of youngsters will help evaluate the program's effectiveness. Durham children born before Durham Connects debuted last month and children living in places without the infant-visitation program will serve as control groups.

The program, run at the Center for Child and Family Policy by Jeannine Sato and at the county Department of Public Health by Helen Wright, will be funded by the Duke Endowment for 10 years — an unusually long period.

"They knew that you could only do so much if your ho-



Helen McKay Wright, the nursing supervisor for Durham Connects, holds a baby outfit at the program's opening celebration Friday at the Durham County Main Library.

PROGRAM GOALS

The backers of Durham Connects want to improve child well-being. Here are some specific goals:

- Having more babies brought to pediatricians for regularly scheduled checkups, even when nothing's wrong. A related goal: discouraging parents from relying on emergency rooms as a primary source for health care.

- Having children immunized on schedule, as opposed to being caught up on shots shortly before it's time to enroll them in school.

- Improving children's cognitive and behavioral development.

- Lowering child abuse rates.

BABYFIT

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horizon is a year," Dodge said. "But you can do more if your horizon is bigger, and [the Endowment] encouraged us to think bigger."

Seven nurses

Durham Connects visits are currently available in about half the county because the Health Department only has seven nurses for the program. When all 20 nurses are hired, the annual budget — mainly nurse salaries, and all paid for by the endowment — will come to about \$2 million.

In offering visits to all Durhamites, regardless of income or language spoken, organizers hope to help not just mothers with limited means but middle- and upper-class moms who may lack the social support or just some of the know-how needed to be great parents.

By connecting parents with resources that will help them raise happier, healthier babies, the pro-

HISTORY

Durham Connects started with a conversation Ken Dodge, director of Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy, had five or six years ago with Rhett Mabry, program officer of the Duke Endowment, a private Charlotte-based foundation that serves North and South Carolina.

"He was interested in discovering a way to have a positive impact in Durham, and so we talked and grew a number of ideas, this being the most prominent," Dodge recalled Friday.

The effort was furthered at a series of Wednesday-morning meetings that included MaryAnn Black, a former chairwoman of the Board of County Commissioners who became a Duke University employee in early 2002, and Carolyn Titus, a deputy Durham County manager. Titus had helped found the Welcome Baby program, in which volunteers conduct hospital and home visits with new mothers.

The pair talked with community leaders such as Marsha Basloe, head of Durham's Partnership for Children; Ellen Holliman, head of the county's managing agency for mental health; Chuck Harris, head of child welfare in the county Social Services Department; and Ellen Reckhow, chairwoman of the Durham commissioners since late 2002.

The ultimate result was Durham Connects, which has spent months preparing for its launch. The program hired its first nurses in late April and officially got under way July 1.

gram is meant to forge stronger bonds between parents and children — and between adults. That was apparent at Friday morning's program launch event, which was attended by 15-year-old Jamesha

Ruffin, a single mother and Hillside High School sophomore.

Ruffin said a springtime visit from Durham Connects nurse Martha Beach, then part of a county program solely for Medicaid-quali-

ble mothers, was helpful.

"She came to teach me new things and tell me what's safe, like the baby sleeping on their back and not their stomach," said Ruffin, who has a 6-month-old daughter named Jayda.

"It was one of those visits where you have great hope in the world when you have young people like that who are open to learning," Beach explained.

The nurse referred Ruffin to a new program, which has been helped along by Durham Connects, called the Grandparent Network. It paired Ruffin with 61-year-old retiree Martha Devone.

Devone has concentrated on helping Ruffin de-stress this summer. She brought Ruffin on a church outing to Roxboro and took Ruffin and her family — mother, grandmother and little brother — out to dinner one night.

"It's been real good," said Devone, who feels like Ruffin has joined her family. "I am so proud to have Jamesha as a mentee."