

One in eight babies born in the United States arrives too soon. Premature birth can happen to any pregnant woman, and no one knows exactly why. It is a serious, common, and costly problem that is the leading cause of newborn death and a major cause of many lifelong disabilities. The March of Dimes is the leading campaign to reduce premature birth by supporting research and by educating the public and health care providers. March of Dimes researchers, volunteers, educators, outreach workers, and advocates work together to give all babies a fighting chance against the possible threats of prematurity, birth defects, and low birth weight.

On August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1921, Franklin D. Roosevelt awoke to find that his legs were paralyzed. Some days later he was diagnosed with polio. This was the beginning of a historical odyssey for both the future U.S. president and a nation in the throes of a mysterious disease that devastated untold thousands of children every year.

In 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt established the March of Dimes to save America's youth from polio. He believed that people could solve any problem if they work together. He created a partnership of volunteers and researchers, and within 17 years, the Salk vaccine had been developed and polio was on the run.

After defeating polio, the March of Dimes turned its attention to an even greater challenge: fighting birth defects and other infant health problems. Over the past four decades, its life saving research, innovative programs, and dedicated volunteers have saved millions of babies from death and disability. With a track record of success in bringing people together to solve complex health challenges, the March of Dimes is uniquely qualified to take on the problem of Prematurity.

Between 1981 and 2002, the rate of premature births rose from 9.4 percent to 12.1. Every year more than 470,000 infants are born prematurely and 100,000 of them develop health problems. The March of Dimes Prematurity Campaign is a five year, \$75 million research, awareness, and education campaign to help families have healthier babies.

Prematurity is a silent crisis in America and has been escalating steadily and alarmingly over the past two decades. Between 1981 and 2002, the rate of premature births rose from 9.4 percent to 12.1. Every year more than 470,000 infants are born prematurely and 100,000 of them develop health problems. The March of Dimes Prematurity Campaign is a five year, \$75 million research, awareness, and education campaign. The campaign includes:

- Funding research to find the causes of premature birth.
- Educating families about the warning signs of premature labor and what can be done to prevent it.
- Expanding access to health care coverage so that more women can get prenatal care.
- Helping health care providers learn ways to help reduce the risk of early delivery.

The campaign is also advocating for a 5-year funding increase of \$50 million to support prematurity-related research being conducted under the aegis of the National Institutes of Health

The March of Dimes has set two main goals in their efforts to reduce the devastating and costly medical complications associated with premature births. These goals are awareness and reduction.

The first goal is to raise awareness about prematurity. They hope to increase the percentage of people who consider prematurity a very serious problem from 35% in 2002 to 60% by 2007. To raise awareness they produce television, radio, and print materials all over the country.

The second goal of the March of Dimes is to reduce the rate of premature births. They want to reduce the rate of prematurity by 15% --- from 11.9% of all births in 2001 to 10.1% in 2007. They will strive to reduce this number by educating people and by funding research.

In order for someone to truly understand what the March of Dimes is all about they need to know what prematurity is and what affect it is having in the U.S and in their own states. Preterm or premature labor happens when you go in to labor before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy. Babies born too soon can have lifelong or life-threatening health problems. Prematurity accounts for 12 percent of all live births in the U.S. and it can happen to any pregnant woman. Premature babies aren't just small babies; they are babies who aren't finished developing. It is the leading killer of babies in their first month of life, a major cause of long-term health problems, and the number one obstetrical problem in the country. Besides the devastating physical toll it takes on babies, prematurity robs families of the full potential of their beloved children and places tremendous financial burdens on everyone. Hospital charges for infants with a principal diagnosis of prematurity averages \$75,000.

While no one knows what causes half of all premature births, experts have identified certain factors that put some women at increased risk. These factors include: pregnancy with twins, triplets, or more, previous preterm birth, and certain uterine or cervical abnormalities.

Having a fundamental understanding of some of the basic facts concerning "births" should help develop an appreciation for the extent of the problems occurring both in the United States and in the State of Alabama.

In an average week in the United States 77,341 babies are born. Of those, 92,246 babies are born preterm. Low birth weights occur for 6,040 babies. Finally, 529 babies die before reaching their first birthday. Every 3 ½ minutes a baby is born with a birth defect in the United States. About 1 in 28 babies is born to a mother who started prenatal care in the 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester or received no prenatal care at all. Also in 2001, birth defects accounted for about 1 in 5 infant deaths and hospital charges for all infants including healthy newborns, totaled \$29.3 billion. Nearly half of that money was for babies with any diagnosis of prematurity (Perinatal Overview, 2004). Preterm birth rates vary within the United States, with the highest percentages being in the Southeast.

Alabama is one of the states that has a high rate of preterm births. In an average week in Alabama, 1,134 babies are born, 178 babies are born premature, 112 babies are born with low birth weights, and 11 babies die before reaching their first birthday. In 2002, there were 9,278

preterm births in Alabama, representing 15.7% of live births. Between 1992 and 2002, the rate of infants born preterm increased by 19%.

Just as the March of Dimes met the challenge of polio with determination, they are just as determined to win the fight against prematurity. For unknown reasons, more than 470,000 babies are born prematurely in the U.S. every year. These babies can suffer lifelong consequences such as mental retardation, blindness, chronic lung disease and cerebral palsy. While most survive, some are so tiny that doctors can't save them. The alarming increase in premature births over the last decade has given the March of Dimes program and even greater desire to save babies. No one is working harder than the March of Dimes to fight premature birth and they will continue fighting until we reach the day when every baby is born healthy.

The March of Dimes is dedicated, organized, and efficient. Their dedication is apparent in the conviction of the organizations volunteers. The professional staff is widely recognized for their organizational skills. The organizational is able to manage contributions in a manner that provides a very high percentage of the total revenues directly to the organizations that it sponsors in such a way as to maximize the benefit to those in need. For these reasons, the March of Dimes is worth of our support.