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HIGH NUMBER OF INFANT DEATHS LINKED TO UNSAFE SLEEPING CONDITIONS

(RICHMOND, Va.)— A report by Virginia’s Chief Medical Examiner says that 12 infants died in 2007 as the direct result of an unsafe sleeping practice and as many as 49 other infants died in instances where unsafe sleeping conditions existed. Unsafe conditions are described as babies sleeping in the same bed with an adult or other children, babies sleeping on soft surfaces such as waterbeds, pillows, comforters or couches or babies sleeping in areas that include quilts, comforters, pillows or toys. The report said such conditions can result in suffocation.

Overall during the past year, 839 infants died in Virginia and the state’s infant mortality rate of 7.7 deaths per 1,000 live births ranks 30th among all states according to America’s Health Ranking, a survey conducted by the United Health Foundation.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine has made reducing Virginia’s infant mortality rate a public health priority and State Health Commissioner, Karen Remley, M.D., MBA, has called infant mortality Virginia’s “unseen epidemic.” The Commissioner recently established a statewide working group on infant mortality, bringing together medical and health professionals, business, community and faith leaders and civic organizations, to develop strategies and actions to reduce the state’s mortality rate.

“A majority of infant deaths are preventable if we improve the health and nutrition of pregnant women and if we improve our child care practices,” Commissioner Remley said. “I am hopeful that this report will increase public awareness of the need to make those changes that will save the lives of more babies this year.”

The Chief Medical Examiner’s Office reviewed 156 infant deaths in 2007 that fell under its jurisdiction. Of these deaths, 46 were classified as Sudden and Unexpected Infant Death (SUID), meaning that no definitive medical or traumatic cause of death could be established but an associated risk factor, such as unsafe sleeping conditions, was present. Another 41 deaths were classified as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), in which the cause of death remains unexplained despite a thorough investigation and autopsy performed by the Medical Examiner’s Office. In these instances, there were no associated unsafe sleep practices. The American Academy of Pediatrics has long recommended putting babies to sleep on their backs as a way to reduce SIDS risk.

Among the findings of the report:

- the majority of the SUID and SIDS deaths involved male babies;
- SUID deaths peaked at one month of life, while most SIDS deaths occurred between two and three months of life; and
- the highest number of SUID and SIDS deaths were of white infants although black infants had the highest mortality rate.

“This is the first year in which we applied the SUID classification statewide for infant deaths,” said Chief Medical Examiner Leah Bush, M.D. “As we continue to develop more precise data that allows us to distinguish SUID cases from SIDS cases, we will be better able to develop and support prevention strategies for these two causes of infant death.”

In its report, the study offered some prevention measures that child care providers should follow, including:

- always put babies to sleep on his or her back, not his or her stomach;
- place babies to sleep in a safety-approved crib (look for a Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association certification label) with a firm tight-fitting mattress and tight-fitting bottom sheet;
- never allow babies to sleep on soft surfaces such as waterbeds, sheepskin rugs, pillows or comforters; and
- remove quilts, comforters, pillows, and other fluffy bedding and toys from a baby's sleep areas and use appropriate sleepwear to keep a baby warm.

Additional information on safe child care practices is available from the Virginia Department of Health at www.vahealth.org/Injury/data/datareports.htm and from the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.aap.org/healthtopics/Sleep.cfm.

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