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Virginia Department of Social Services Launches Comprehensive Campaign to Promote Safer Sleep for Infants

Richmond, VA (September 6, 2017) - As part of its ongoing effort to reduce sleep-related infant fatalities throughout the Commonwealth, the [Virginia Department of Social Services](#) (VDSS) has kicked off a statewide safe sleep campaign and call-to-action pledge, [Safe Sleep 365](#). The campaign, which coincides with National Infant Safe Sleep Awareness Month in September and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) Awareness Month in October, is designed to educate parents, families and caregivers regarding the steps they can take to prevent sleep-related death in infants. The public awareness campaign builds on the core principles of “**Alone, Apart and Always**” to emphasize simple practices all Virginians can follow to provide a safe and healthy environment for infants each time they sleep.

In Virginia, sleep-related death is the leading cause of non-natural death for infants up to one year of age. In 2016, nearly half of all child fatalities in Virginia, of infants up to one year of age, were related to unsafe sleep practices, which were either the result of an unsafe sleep surface, co-sleeping, or how the child was placed to sleep. Many of the sleep-related child deaths resulted in a determination by a medical examiner that the cause of death was Sudden Unexplained Infant Death (SUID), a diagnosis that recognizes a host of confounding factors, most importantly, the presence of unsafe sleep practices.

“Reducing the rate of preventable child fatalities throughout the Commonwealth continues to be a priority of our work as an agency,” said VDSS Commissioner Margaret Ross Schultze. “Safe Sleep 365 provides a platform to bring greater awareness to the role we all have - as caregivers and a community - in preventing child fatalities related to unsafe sleep practices.”

A 2014 report published by the Virginia State Child Fatality Review Team also noted the following regarding 119 unexpected, sleep-related child fatalities in 2009:

- 95% of the sleep-related fatalities were preventable
- 90% were related to an unsafe sleep environment
- 3 out of 4 infants who died were four months of age or younger
- More than 50% were placed on their stomachs to sleep
- More than 70% were exposed to secondhand smoke
- 73% of infants were sleeping on a surface not intended for infant sleep at the time of their death
- 57% of the cases were related to co-sleeping. Of these cases, 26% included a co-sleeper impaired by drugs or alcohol.

Also in 2014, the sleep-related fatality rate for infants in Virginia’s western region was 219.9 per 100,000 and 111.2 per 100,000 in the eastern region, indicating that infants in these regions are at greatest risk.

“Sleep-related infant deaths are not discriminatory. It is an issue that impacts infants from all races and socioeconomic statuses,” said Carl Ayers, VDSS director of family services. “Infants who sleep in bed with

adults, as well as those who are exposed to secondhand smoke, are at greater risk for SUID. It is imperative that parents and caregivers encourage the use of safe sleep spaces, and share life-saving practices with caregivers to reduce sleep-related infant mortality in Virginia.”

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, nearly 20 percent of all sudden infant deaths occur while an infant is in the care of someone other than a parent. Additionally, infants who sleep on their stomachs are 18 times more likely to die from SIDS when placed to sleep on their backs. As a result, emphasizing safe-sleeping practices is a message that not only extends to parents but also to all caregivers, including siblings, neighbors, grandparents and child care providers.

The Safe Sleep 365 campaign includes multi-layered mediums to educate parents and caregivers on the risk factors associated with SUIDS as well as safe sleep practices that promote placing infants **ALONE** in a firm crib/bassinet or other safe sleep space, **APART** from people, toys, blankets, pillows or other items, and **ALWAYS** on his/her back in a drug- and alcohol- free environment. The campaign features statewide billboards, social media outreach, multimedia, and a dedicated website, www.safesleep365.com.

Additional components of the campaign include a public call-to-action inviting all parents and caregivers to pledge to help save the lives of Virginia’s infants, and join the statewide effort to increase awareness of safe sleep practices.

Further, through partnership with the [Children’s Hospital of Richmond at VCU](#) and [Baby Box University](#), VDSS will also provide safe sleep resources and education, and participate in a safe sleep study that will measure the effectiveness/impact of four components – the distribution of baby boxes, face-to-face safe sleep education, home visits with a medical expert, and Virginia’s safe sleep curriculum made accessible through the Baby Box University platform. The study will also commence this month with preliminary findings expected by spring 2018.

For more information, visit the Safe Sleep 365 campaign website at www.safesleep365.com.