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Illinois DCFS kicks off Infant Safe Sleep Awareness Month in partnership with southern Illinois hospitals and community groups

O'FALLON, IL – The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), HSHS St. Elizabeth's Hospital, SIHF Healthcare and HEALTHIER TOGETHER are joining forces to help prevent sleep related infant deaths in southern Illinois.

Representatives held a press conference today at HSHS St. Elizabeth's Hospital, 1 St. Elizabeth's Blvd. in O'Fallon, Illinois to officially support Infant Safe Sleep Awareness Month, a statewide prevention and education campaign aimed at reducing the risk of sleep related infant deaths by providing essential information about the importance of creating a safe sleep environment to child caregivers and the public. The goal is to maintain awareness throughout the year by partnering with community organizations and health care providers.

Unsafe sleep is a leading cause of death for children one year old and younger. In 2018, 143 infants in Illinois under the age of 1 died because of being put to sleep unsafely, including 25 in the southern Illinois region, which consists of 14 counties.

"Every week DCFS is notified of babies who have died from unsafe sleeping environments. These deaths are particularly tragic because they are preventable," said Marc D. Smith, acting director of DCFS. "These are our children. We are all responsible for making sure every parent across Illinois is aware of the danger to their child when they do not create a safe sleeping environment. DCFS is committed to partnering with everyone who shares our mission of protecting children to address this challenge. By collaborating, our communication and outreach efforts to create awareness will have greater impact."

Of the 143 infant deaths in 2018, 114 were found in locations other than a crib, bassinet or pack and play; 102 were found in positions other than on their back; and 97 were co-sleeping with another individual at the time of death.

Hospitals and community groups are also doing their part to ensure safe sleep for infants. St. Elizabeth's was recently recognized by the National Safe Sleep Hospital Certification Program, created by Cribs for Kids, as a Bronze Safe Sleep Hospital. In addition, the hospital offers Safe Sleep classes in partnership with SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital.

"While St. Elizabeth's Women and Infants Center always educates new mothers about the risk factors associated with infant mortality, we are working diligently within the hospital and with community partners to increase this important education and resources for our mothers and families to improve outcomes," said Deb Meidel, RN, BSN, nurse manager of St. Elizabeth's Women and Infants Center.

"SIHF Healthcare Healthy Start addresses infant mortality reduction through education and promotion of safe sleep practices, improving access to quality health care for women and their infants and the promotion of optimal health for women before, during and after pregnancy," said Paula Brodie, vice president of communications and support services at SIHF Healthcare. "Healthy Start is excited and committed to working with community partners to educate parents and all infant caregivers on the ABCs of a safe sleep environment to reduce sleep related deaths and decrease infant deaths in St. Clair County. We believe that every baby deserves to celebrate *Day 366!*"

"The HEALTHIER TOGETHER collective impact movement is designed to accomplish together what no single organization can accomplish alone – build healthier communities through healthy collaborations," said Mark Peters of HEALTHIER TOGETHER. "We're delighted to participate with all the organizations who make up the Maternal and Child Health partnership to promote their ABCs of Safe Sleep initiative. Our goal is to continue to support the efforts of these dedicated partners so that families and newborns can sleep well into a long, healthy and productive life."

About the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Founded in 1964, DCFS is responsible for protecting children from abuse or neglect by responding to calls received on the Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-25-ABUSE (1-800-252-2873). With the goal of keeping children safe, DCFS strengthens and supports families with a wide range of services. When keeping a child safe means removing them from the home, DCFS makes every effort to reunite them with their family. When the best interest of the child makes this impossible, DCFS is committed to pursuing adoption by loving families to provide children with a safe and permanent home. DCFS is also responsible for licensing and monitoring of all Illinois child welfare agencies.

About Hospital Sisters Health System The Hospital Sisters Health System's (HSHS) mission is to reveal and embody Christ's healing love for all people through our high quality, Franciscan health care ministry. HSHS provides state-of-the-art health care to our patients and is dedicated to serving all people, especially the most vulnerable, at each of our 15 local systems and physician practices in Illinois (Breese, Decatur, Effingham, Greenville, Highland, Litchfield, O'Fallon, Shelbyville and Springfield) and Wisconsin (Chippewa Falls, Eau Claire, Oconto Falls, Sheboygan and two in Green Bay). HSHS is sponsored by Hospital Sisters Ministries, and Hospital Sisters of St. Francis is the founding institute. For more information about HSHS, visit www.hshs.org. For more information about Hospital Sisters of St. Francis, visit www.hospitalsisters.org.