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Vigo County unveils Safe Sleep educational trailer

David Kronke , The Tribune-Star, Terre Haute, Ind.

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At the ribbon-cutting for the Vigo County Health Department's Safe Sleep Trailer on Tuesday, Health Department Administrator Joni Wise said the Safe Sleep Trailer was the first of its kind in the state.

That's because the idea for a mobile safe sleep educational trailer had never occurred to anyone before the department's health educator, Shelby Jackson.

Jackson recalled being at one of the Health Department's quarterly meetings, reviewing fetal and infant mortality when she realized, "A lot of people know the ABCs of safe sleep, but when it comes to practicing it, we fall short."

She thought of a way to demonstrate for adults safe sleep habits for infants: They should always be in a crib with nothing else but a fitted sheet in it — no toys, no pillows, no blankets — and they should always be positioned on their backs.

Alone, Back, Crib — the ABC of safe sleep.

So the Safe Sleep Trailer comes decked out with a car seat, bouncer and crib with blankets. The company Safe Sleep Simulation. donated two 3-D infant models — which it sells for \$900 apiece — and educational materials.

The infant models cleave in half to reveal the stomach and lungs, and demonstrate that when babies are on their back, air fills their lungs and liquid is in the stomach.

Anthony Foust, fourth from left, of Safe Sleep Simulation cuts a ribbon Tuesday during the introduction of the Vigo County Health Department's new Safe Sleep Trailer at the Vigo County Annex.

If the infant is lying on its stomach, however, the liquid transfers from the stomach to the lungs through the trachea, which could cause choking.

The car seat and bouncer show how airways can be restricted when infants fall asleep in them for an extended period of time.

After seeing all of this, trainees — who could be family members who are around infants, first responders, childcare providers and any organization working with families — are then tasked with placing the infant in the crib safely.

“I can watch them practicing this,” Jackson said. “They know and show me they know by practice. ... The Vigo County Health Department Safe Sleep Trailer provides education beyond the ABCs of safe sleep through tactile learning.”

Trainees can help themselves to informational magnets and stickers and a copy of a 28 page wire-bound book from the Indiana Department of Health, “Sleep Baby Safe Field Guide.”

Jackson will take the Safe Sleep Trailer throughout the state for demonstrations — next week, she’ll be in Carmel for a public health nursing conference. It can also visit universities and other teaching programs, physicians, churches and the Red Cross.

“And others with a vested interest in safe sleep and our babies living long, healthy lives,” Wise added.

Wise said that the price tag for the trailer with a television, generator and other supplies came in at a little under \$20,000 and was paid for by Health First Indiana.

Shelby Jackson, a health educator with the Vigo County Health Department, uses a model of a baby to explain to Diana Winsted-Smith and others what harm can come from a baby being placed on his or her stomach to sleep during her presentation Tuesday at the Vigo County Annex.

“We talked about the logistics of it, the cost, and realized the benefit is greater than any cost,” Wise said. “This was Shelby’s brainchild, and we were able to see it come to life.”

The trailer’s interior received a makeover from the Health Department’s Vector Control Division. They made the floors safer, built a storage closet in the front and pinned hundreds of blue and pink ribbons over one wall.

The ribbons are a memorial to the many infant deaths between 2020 and 2024, honoring the shortened lives of 230 girls and 321 boys. The memorial will be updated periodically.

Hicham Rahmouni, the executive director of the Richard G. Lugar Center for Rural Health, lauded Jackson and Wise's efforts.

"I'm thankful for their leadership and partnership because infant mortality has been such a challenge, and one of the elements that we can educate families more on is safe sleep," he said. "Our collaboration with the Health Department and the [community health center] All Babies Initiative has been a big part of our community coming together to improve and support pregnant and parenting families."

For more information about the state's Safe Sleep Program, visit <https://www.in.gov/health/safesleep/safe-sleep/>