“Safe Sleep” campaign aims to reduce infant mortality in Baltimore

Ursula V. Battle | 6/28/2013, midnight

Antoine Dow and his two-year-old son Nasir. Dow, who owns Cutt Styles Unisex Barbershop in Druid Heights is featured in a new video aimed at showing fathers the proper way to put their infants to sleep. Courtesy photo

BALTIMORE — Antoine Dow is a barber and business owner. The father of three children, Dow has put his children to sleep on numerous occasions. However, Dow says he watched a video that ultimately changed the way he was putting his infant son to sleep.

“After watching this video I realized that I was putting my son to sleep incorrectly and risking his life,” said Dow who owns Cutt Styles Unisex Barbershop. “This issue is extremely important for me as father.”

The Druid Heights resident had watched a video released by B’more for Healthy Babies (BHB), which showed the proper way to put infants to sleep. Dow shows the video to clients who come to his barbershop.

“This issue is extremely important for me as father,” said Dow. “I get this information out to other fathers who are risking their child's life by incorrect safe sleeping patterns. I want to save as many children’s lives as possible.”

Now Dow himself is featured in a video aimed at reducing infant mortality rates in Baltimore City. In the new video, Dow and two other fathers talk about the importance of safe sleep and encourage fathers to tell their
friends to put their babies to sleep following the “Alone. Back. Crib.” method.

The video is part of the new “SAFE SLEEP” campaign, which seeks to encourage fathers to implement and promote safe sleep practices. The launching of the campaign coincided with Father’s Day, and is being presented by Baltimore Commissioner of Health Dr. Oxiris Barbot, The Family League of Baltimore, and leaders of the B’more for Healthy Babies.

“We identified community partners who were trusted health information communicators,” said Barbot. “We focused on Druid Heights because of the high infant mortality rates. We specifically focused on barbershops, which is how we met Mr. Dow. He is a messenger for us in his community.”

In addition to the video, the campaign features posters and media outreach. The campaign is part of a multi-year messaging strategy, launched in August 2010, focused on promoting a safe sleep environment for infants.

“The most fundamental goal is to change behavior,” said Barbot. “We want a city where all of our babies are born healthy, full-term, and ready to thrive. That means that everybody knows that babies are put to sleep on their backs, and in their cribs alone. That also means no stuffed animals, and no smoking around the infants.”

Cosponsored by the Family League and the Baltimore City Health Department, the BHB initiative was launched in 2010 to combat Baltimore’s high rate of infant mortality.

“Infant mortality is a significant public health issue and an indicator of how the community is taking care of its most vulnerable,” said Barbot. “We saw a need for this campaign not just to reduce overall infant mortality, but to address the disparity between African American mortality rates and white individuals in the city.”

She added, “The need for this initiative was also based on a combination of research, focus groups, community involvement, and looking at the data which illustrated a significant number of infant deaths were due to unsafe sleep practices. A campaign was needed that was strong and effective in getting across an important public health message about safe sleep.”

Through the implementation of new policies, the launch of various messaging campaigns such as the “SAFE SLEEP” campaign, and by forging partnerships with community organizations, the initiative has spotlighted the issue of infant mortality in Baltimore.

It appears that the efforts have paid off. Up until 2009—the year in which BHB was launched—Baltimore City had the fourth highest infant mortality rate in the United States.

According to statistics obtained from the Baltimore City Health Department, there has been a 27 percent decline in overall infant deaths (not just sleep-related) in Baltimore between 2009 and 2011.

“The biggest measure of success is that we have seen a decrease in sleep-related infant deaths over past two years,” said Dr. Barbot. “The first campaign focused on moms, and this one focuses on dads. There
will also be two additional phases which focus on grandparents, other caregivers, and the Spanish speaking population.

The new “SLEEP SAFE” video can be seen at a number of different places including hospitals and some circuit courts. To see the video online, or for more information, visit: healthybabiesbaltimore.com.