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Close to one million dollars is being earmarked to provide prenatal care and reduce infant mortality in Concordia Parish – *Healthy Babies Concordia* project draws commitment of nation’s largest healthcare foundation

Over the next four years close to one million dollars will be dedicated to address the vital issue of increasing access to healthcare for pregnant women in Concordia Parish. The funding is being awarded to Central Louisiana Area Health Education Center (CLAHEC) for the *Healthy Babies Concordia* project. This parish was targeted for the effort, based on the area’s needs, where approximately 300 infants are born each year, with less than half of the mothers receiving adequate prenatal care. The infant mortality rate in Concordia parish is higher than both the national and state average. During the 1990s the average rate was 10 per 1,000 live births.

The *Healthy Babies Concordia* project is being made possible through the commitment of The Rapides Foundation, which led the way to secure matching funding from other sources to address the issue. The Rapides Foundation will fund \$400,000 for this effort. Based on that commitment, the largest healthcare foundation in this country, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, awarded \$350,000 to match The Rapides Foundation’s investment in *Healthy Babies Concordia*. In addition, Louisiana’s Office of Public Health Region 6 has made an additional financial commitment, funding nurse home visitation personnel, as well as providing headquarters for the project’s staff.

During the next four years, combined funds totaling \$986,000 will be used to address the urgent pre and post-natal needs of families in Concordia parish by expanding a network of assistance and healthcare, while addressing barriers to that care such as transportation and childcare. Research shows the timing of a mother’s first prenatal care visit, maternal age, ethnicity, education and pregnancy weight gain have significant influences on birth weight and health of the newborn.

The Rapides Foundation is a philanthropic organization in Alexandria, that provides grants to organizations throughout an 11-parish service area, including Concordia parish, that share the foundation's mission to improve the health and well-being of Central Louisiana. The Foundation accomplishes these goals by funding organizations, such as CLAHEC, that have the commitment, leadership, and capacity to improve health care issues in communities. The Foundation recognized strengths in the components of *Healthy Babies Concordia*, such as individual needs assessment through outreach workers, and nurse home visitation representing proven interventions designed to improve the health of high-risk mothers and their babies.

Concerned health care and social service providers, along with educators and agencies, recognized the growing problems related to infant mortality in Concordia parish. A dedicated group called the *Healthy Babies Concordia Consortium* was formed to address those concerns. According to Chief Executive Officer, Sharon Womack, "As part of our mission to improve access to quality health care, CLAHEC stepped forward to act as lead agency to pursue funding for the concept." Guidance from The Rapides Foundation enabled CLAHEC to work diligently with members to assess prenatal health care and birth outcomes in the parish, pinpoint deficits contributing to the poor health of pregnant women and their babies, and determine health, ancillary services and medical issues affecting this population.

Various models and approaches in other areas were carefully evaluated for effectiveness. "Sheer determination and true collaboration has kept the *Healthy Babies Concordia Consortium* alive over the last two years" says Womack. With the goal of funding fulfilled, Consortium members will now act as an advisory board for the project.

The Rapides Foundation nominated Healthy Babies Concordia for this Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) grant. The RWJF Local Initiative Funding Partners (LIFP) program is highly competitive and awards grants to projects that are considered potential national models. LIFP uses rigorous criteria to identify community-based projects that develop new approaches and collaborations to resolve health care needs.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, NJ, is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to basic health care at reasonable cost; to improve care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse--tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs.

Implementation of the eagerly awaited *Healthy Babies Concordia* project knocks down barriers and opens the door for area health care providers and social service agencies to strengthen the chain of services that will ultimately reduce infant mortality factors in the area.