

## **Aetna Participates in Summit of Health Leaders to Help New Jersey Address Black Mother and Infant Mortality**

According to the New Jersey Governor’s office, new mothers in their state are dying on average at a faster rate than the rest of the nation. It is even more dire for mothers and babies of color--- New Jersey has the widest racial disparity in the United States, with the infant mortality rate among Blacks more than triple the rate among Whites.

Aetna’s Medical Director for the Northeast Region, Deborah Johnson-Rothe, M.D. FAAP recently participated in a summit of regional health leaders convened by Tammy Murphy, the First Lady of New Jersey, to help tackle this issue. The cross-section of leaders— legislators, providers, state government cabinet officials, leaders from foundations, non-profit and community organizations, and the New Jersey health care system— workshoped long-term, medium-term and short-term solutions to this crisis.

One focus area was the reason for the gap in infant and maternal mortality among women and babies of color. As a former state commissioner for New Jersey, Dr. Johnson-Rothe provided insights on her experience during her tenure in state government, in the medical field and while at Aetna.



Aetna’s Deborah Johnson-Rothe, M.D. and NJ First Lady Tammy Murphy

“While one issue that contributes to infant and mother mortality is a lack of wanting, or fear in seeking medical care, another significant factor is institutional bias and institutional racism, which is real, and it prevails over the infant and mother mortality rate issue and cuts across socioeconomic status,” Dr. Johnson-Rothe said. “This issue was as present in New Jersey more than 20 years ago as it is today.”

To combat the challenge of the lack of access or knowledge of medical care, Dr. Johnson-Rothe shared some of the successes of the AetnaCare program, including how the personalized care approach helps simplify members’ health journeys by speaking to them about available resources in their plan. This helps to identify what might be preventing members from being healthy, including providing educational resources they can tap, such as talking about nutrition, so they can live a healthier life.

“Participants were very focused on ways we could leverage Medicaid programs to tackle this gap and when I shared how we were helping our commercial members by meeting them where they are—their home, the gym, Starbucks— to educate them and talk them their through the AetnaCare program, it raised a lot of interest among the participants to broaden the thinking outside of Medicaid.”

Dr Johnson-Rothe believes that AetnaCare can be replicated to help pregnant women.

“If we can educate them on resources available to them, how they can increase or adopt a healthy lifestyle and decrease their stress, we can help combat maternal mortality one member at a time, helping build healthier communities.”

In addition to the AetnaCare approach, Dr. Johnson-Rothe and her peers brainstormed ways the health industry can address institutional bias, including ramping up educational campaigns targeting physicians

and students at major medical schools and hospitals in New Jersey. They also spoke about continuing to educate the general population, encouraging those who are eligible to enroll in medical benefits and those who are already enrolled, to understand what's available to them and are equipped with information to ask the right questions when they go to the doctor.

Because of her experience and participation in the summit, Fran Gallagher, CEO of the New Jersey chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics asked Dr. Johnson-Rothe to serve as chairperson of the Black Infant Mortality committee for the New Jersey Chapter. The New Jersey Chapter will continue to focus on how the community can practically address this challenge of black infant and mother mortality in the state.