

Embracing a Healthy Start

Johnea was about eight months pregnant with her second child when she learned about the Kansas City Healthy Start Initiative (KCHSI) program at Swope Health Services (SHS).

Now, after seven months in the program, she feels like she has been adopted and embraced.

“It’s like I have an extended family,” she said. “The doors are always open. They are so caring and their arms are so wide!”

Healthy Start is a federally-funded program, offered by the Health Resources and Services Administration department of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, to support healthy pregnancy and early childhood. The Kansas City Healthy Start Initiative operates at SHS and at Samuel Rodgers Health Center through Mother & Child Health Coalition.

Kansas City Healthy Start supports eligible women from ZIP codes in Jackson County (MO) and Wyandotte County (KS), where infant mortality rates are higher than average. The free program helps pregnant women and women with children under the age of 2, get information and services they need to have a healthy pregnancy, raise a healthy family, and keep themselves healthy and strong.

“In the program, each woman is assigned a community health worker (CHW),” said Ahkeya Howard, SHS Lead CHW and a licensed clinical social worker. “Each CHW provides a broad range of services to help the individual mother with her immediate needs, for example, attending medical appointments, signing up for health insurance, obtaining food, housing assistance or job training referrals. To help strengthen family resilience, referral and resource information is also provided for the father of the baby and/or male significant other.”

“Our goal when they get here is to make sure they are getting the best care possible and utilizing what is available to them,” said Howard. “We take time to find the right resources.”

The support is also personal, Howard notes. Regular discussions include topics like managing stress or depression, safe sleep practices, child development, breastfeeding, building strong relationships, and setting positive goals.

“They always say ‘let’s put you first, how are *you* today,’” Johnea said. “It all starts with a strong foundation in the mother, mentally and physically.”



Kansas City Healthy Start Initiative

Find more information:

- [Mother & Child Health Coalition](#)
- [Maternal and Child Health \(HRSA\)](#)
- [Apply for Kansas City Healthy Start Initiative](#)

That means caring conversations about what's going on at home, how the children are feeling, what help might be needed. Johnea described the CHWs and program team as mentors and coaches, mothers themselves who understand her feelings and always give support.

"We get a lot of hugs," Johnea said.



Johnea received information on topics from breastfeeding to job openings. The program provides HappyBottoms diapers for her children, and has given her the opportunity to meet other women through events like a holiday dinner and story-time readings for children.

The Swope Health Services KC Healthy Start Initiative team, from left: Community Health Workers Tameka White, Treva Smith, Ahkeya Howard (Lead CHW), and Angela Hawkins.

As a result of the program, Johnea now is working toward returning to school to finish her nursing degree and find a good job in health care. She's also working on potty training her two-year-old daughter.

"I would recommend it to any woman. It is a family-oriented program that is beneficial all the way around," Johnea said. "I love it."

Would you like more information about the Kansas City Healthy Start Initiative? Call SHS at 816-599-5790 and come visit with our Healthy Start team. You can also contact the Healthy Start team at Samuel U. Rodgers Health Center, at 816-474-4920 or visit the website at www.mchc.net/kansas-city-healthy-start to learn more, refer someone else, or sign yourself up for Healthy Start.

--Story written by Nancy Shaw.