

## The Power of Storytelling: Amplifying Families Voices and Uniting the Community: Promoting Continuity of Breastfeeding Care Through Storytelling in Knox County, Tennessee

### Implementing the Continuity of Care in Breastfeeding Support Blueprint

By Sarah Lisson, MS, MPH, RDN, LDN  
Knox County Health Department



### Synopsis

Through digital storytelling, thirteen (13) families were encouraged to share personal experiences of navigating continuity of care in their breastfeeding journeys. This program was the first opportunity for many families to share their stories in their own words, which led to participants reporting feelings of affirmation, empowerment, and healing. The digital stories sparked conversations between stakeholders and provided a human perspective to complement existing quantitative data on breastfeeding rates and disparities. Themes that emerged from this work will (1) inform future trainings offered to medical residents on cultural humility and family-centered care (Blueprint Recommendations 5.5, 6.2, 6.3), (2) direct intentions and activities for the newly established local breastfeeding coalition (Blueprint Recommendation 7.1), and (3) strengthen partnerships with hospitals in the community.

### Challenge

Knox County's breastfeeding initiation rate (85.7%) is among the highest in Tennessee, but these rates drop considerably during the first few months post-birth. In addition, there are disparities among racial/ethnic groups for various birthing outcomes. Black pregnant women in Knox County are less likely than their Caucasian counterparts to receive adequate prenatal care, and Black infants are more than twice as likely to be born with a low birth weight. Additionally, fetal and infant mortality rates in Knox County are higher for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black births than for Caucasian births.

One of Knox County Health Department's (KCHD) priorities is to build relationships with the community members they serve. An analysis of Knox County's workforce showed that local lactation support providers (LSPs) are primarily Caucasian providers who only speak English. In addition to KCHD's partners reporting that residents and physicians receive little to no breastfeeding training, their patients and clients reported receiving inconsistent breastfeeding.



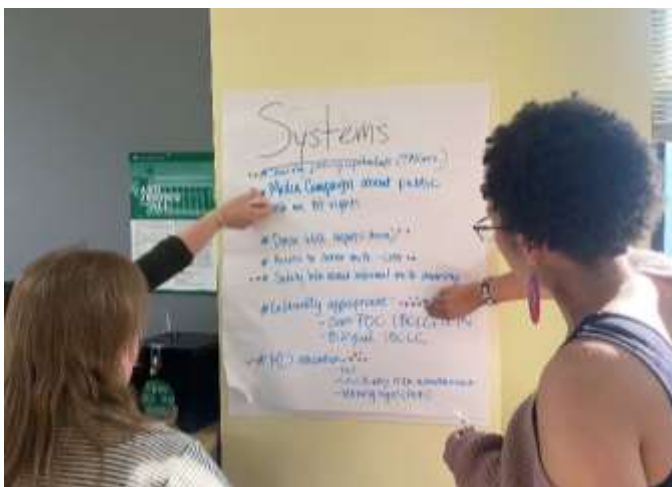
Knox County Health Department welcomed NACCHO for a site visit in October 2023.

For several years, continuity of care was also hindered by the absence of a local coalition. The previous East Tennessee Breastfeeding Coalition (ETBC) had not been active since 2018, and there was no united effort among providers and organizations to promote and implement activities to support breastfeeding equity in and around Knox County.

## Solution

KCHD received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and with technical assistance support from the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) through the *Implementing the Continuity of Care Blueprint* project. From November 2022 to December 2023, KCHD established a workplan to address low breastfeeding rates, remove barriers to continuity of care, and strengthen their workforce development initiatives.

KCHD partnered with StoryCenter, a nonprofit that leverages the power of storytelling for social change, to facilitate digital storytelling workshops. Through KCHD's extensive partner network, local hospitals, nonprofits, WIC, the Knoxville Black Doula Collective, the Knox County Birth Equity Alliance, and the East Tennessee Breastfeeding Coalition, KCHD recruited local families (11 mothers and 2 fathers) with the goal of garnering a diverse set of breastfeeding, pregnancy, and postpartum experiences. Through these stories, KCHD was able to develop an informal lactation care landscape of community assets and shortcomings and provide a stronger context to the quantitative data on breastfeeding and lactation in Knox County, Tennessee.



Participants developed their digital stories through discussions during the StoryCenter workshops.

These virtual workshop sessions were led by StoryCenter facilitators, who guided storytellers through the process of writing a script and editing audio, video, and photos together to create a short digital story. All storytellers were

compensated for their time and lived expertise. Additionally, due to the sensitive nature of participant's stories, mental health professionals and care were made accessible to participants.

In addition to the digital storytelling workshops, KCHD reestablished East Tennessee Breastfeeding Coalition (ETBC) in May 2023, bringing together LSPs and others who work with breastfeeding families to promote improved continuity of care in Knox County. KCHD also implemented breastfeeding education for OB/GYN residents at the University of Tennessee Medical Center (UTMC) and established an internal workgroup to develop a unified approach to maternal and child health (MCH) among KCHD's divisions.

## Results

Thirteen stories created through the digital storytelling workshops represented a diverse range of races/ethnicities, occupations, and zip codes. Of the 13 storytellers, 46% (n= 6) identified as non-white and 8% (n= 1) spoke Spanish as their primary language. Common themes from the storytellers included not knowing where to find support, not feeling heard by healthcare providers, and overcoming obstacles to reach breastfeeding goals.

Storytellers reflected on the workshops and expressed that hearing from others who had similar experiences made storytellers feel less alone and helped them find a sense of community. Many also expressed that the potential for helping other families had motivated them to participate in this project. During the October 2023 ETBC meeting, one storyteller shared her digital story and reflected on what this experience meant to her. ETBC members representing a variety of fields, including lactation care, public health, and academia, reflected on the goal of continuing to build up the community's capacity to share their breastfeeding journeys. Group discussion topics included ways to involve partners and caregivers, normalizing exclusive pumping as a breastfeeding method, the importance of prenatal breastfeeding education, and barriers to effective breastfeeding promotion and lactation support in hospitals. Ideas for connecting providers with training opportunities and increasing access to educational resources in English and Spanish were also shared. This practice of storytelling will continue in future ETBC meetings and will be incorporated into future workforce education initiatives.

The reestablishment of ETBC during the grant has enhanced KCHD's ability to build a united front among stakeholders working to promote breastfeeding equity. ETBC members represent a variety of sectors and workplaces and have presented new opportunities for collaboration with KCHD

and each other. Additionally, KCHD has established an internal Maternal & Child Health (MCH) workgroup to streamline the process of referring families to programs and services that promote continuity of care, and to advertise these programs and services to the community.

## Lessons Learned

KCHD's experience in recruiting storytellers highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with community partners. KCHD's partners played a key role in advertising the digital storytelling workshops to several populations around Knox County. The health department also leveraged the power of social media and posted the workshop application in several Facebook groups, including the *Knox Breastfriends Group*. The success of this approach has encouraged KCHD to continue to seek out creative partnerships to engage community members in new ways.

When inviting community partners to participate in a project, who gets a seat at the table is important, but the order in which they are invited also matters. Though ETBC's meetings have always been open to the public, the steering committee decided to focus marketing and recruitment efforts for the first meeting on the local lactation workforce, as this population would bring knowledge, connections, and influence that would help ETBC build momentum efficiently and effectively.

Even more, this project demonstrated that community members want their voices to be heard, and that all stories provide a unique perspective to identifying and addressing key barriers to advance continuity of care. The KCHD team was reminded that the perinatal period comes with unique combinations of stressors and challenges for many families, and workforce education should address the challenges and raw emotions that many families experience in the perinatal period. With these shifts in mind, care givers and LSPs can provide empathetic, family centered care more frequently and consistently. KCHD's long-term goal is to incorporate the digital stories into workforce education and training opportunities to promote cultural humility and share the reality of many families' early breastfeeding journeys. Moving forward, KCHD hopes to provide more equitable opportunities for non-English speakers to participate in the workshop and share their stories in their native language, such as utilizing photovoice. Photovoice is a research method in which participants take photographs to express their point of view on an issue. These digital stories will help to create a more empathetic and aware breastfeeding and lactation support workforce.

## Resources

[Pumping is Breastfeeding, Too: A Digital Story by Autumn VanDyke](#)

[Digital Stories Playlist](#)

[Digital Storytelling Workshop Application Template](#)

[Other Success Stories and the Continuity of Care in Breastfeeding Support: A Blueprint for Communities](#)

Contact us at: [breastfeeding@naccho.org](mailto:breastfeeding@naccho.org)