



Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative Evaluation Learning Memo

What We're Learning About Progress Toward Systems Change in St. Louis

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Prepared by:

Learning for Action

Prepared for:

FLOURISH St. Louis

Missouri Foundation for Health



*LFA partners with social sector organizations to advance
knowledge, capacity, and culture of learning in the service of equity and justice.*

About this Memo

This Learning Memo is part of an evaluation of the Infant Mortality Reduction Initiative – a 10-year initiative funded by the Missouri Foundation for Health beginning in 2013 and led by FLOURISH in the St. Louis region. In Fall 2020, MFH engaged Learning for Action to lead the initiative-level evaluation efforts, with a focus on exploring how IMRI efforts are contributing to changes in systems and greater health equity for Black babies and families. This memo builds off a series of evaluation activities, beginning with an initial process to identify the systems change goals that should be prioritized for the initiative evaluation. LFA facilitated a participatory process in spring 2021 with an evaluation advisory group made up of FLOURISH staff and partners, where the group homed in on the specific parts of their Theory of Change where they wanted the evaluation to focus. The group prioritized the following three systems change goals, and a set of corresponding early changes that they see contributing to these goals:

- Goal 1: Policymakers and systems leaders actively listen to and incorporate community voice
- Goal 2: Black providers are elevated as experts
- Goal 3: Entities that work on reducing infant mortality are coordinated and aligned

In summer 2021, LFA conducted a series of interviews with FLOURISH staff and partners to understand the extent to which the priority *early changes* had occurred, resulting in a [summary](#) that provides a snapshot of those changes. This was then followed by online reflection sessions in fall 2021 with FLOURISH leadership and community partners, focused on exploring progress toward the three *systems change* goals. LFA facilitated two two-hour interactive reflection sessions that engaged a total of 28 participants. The reflective conversations were designed to surface insights on the extent to which partners were seeing the systems changes take shape, where they see evidence of change, what barriers lie in the way of achieving those changes, and what it would take to overcome them or initiate progress.

This memo is a summary of the key insights and stories gleaned from community reflection session participants, triangulated with what the LFA team has learned through early change interviews and review of previous documentation of FLOURISH's IMRI activities and impact. The purpose of this memo is to inform those deeply engaged in this work about where there has been progress to date and what more is needed to drive change.

FLOURISH IMRI Systems Change Goals Explored in this Memo

[Goal 1: Policymakers and systems leaders actively listen to and incorporate community voice](#)

[Goal 2: Black providers are elevated as experts](#)

[Goal 3: Entities that work on reducing infant mortality are coordinated and aligned](#)

Goal 1: Policymakers and systems leaders actively listen to and incorporate community voice

How is FLOURISH making progress toward this goal?

FLOURISH is recognized by other organizations as a model for centering community voice. They are finding ways to tap into the community, connecting with those who want to create change, and offering them opportunities to do it.

FLOURISH is building the community's capacity to be storytellers and advocates for infant wellbeing. FLOURISH is using a unique storytelling model to get the attention of policymakers and, according to community reflection session participants, this may be one of the most robust ways in which the organization is making progress toward this goal. Recognizing the need to center the voices of those most deeply affected by infant mortality, FLOURISH is working to build the community's capacity to amplify their voice, to both build awareness about the issue and elevate community-driven solutions to address it. Community listening sessions, data sessions, ensuring the Community Leaders Cabinet is involved in designing community workshops and offerings, and specific workshops focused on storytelling have all helped to build community voice.

The storytelling workshops for FLOURISH's community leaders have been particularly effective. FLOURISH provides these workshops for free, offering participants an opportunity to craft their story and effectively put voice to the changes they want and need, as well as tips for how they can tell their story in a way that elected officials will hear. The workshops are helping community leaders feel comfortable speaking up, and their testimonies are making a difference. One community reflection session participant shared how the trainings prepared her for sharing her story with a Senator on Child Advocacy Day and asking for programmatic change. That Senator went on to share her story with other lawmakers, and ultimately passed a bill that put the desired change into effect. Other workshop participants have gone on to join hospital advisory boards and other community leadership positions, where they are using the leadership and advocacy skills gained through FLOURISH trainings to make change in their communities.

"Community members and leaders don't always learn strategies and tools to advocate for themselves and tell their story. It's more than just talking. Telling it so people will listen. ... The training has made community members comfortable telling their stories."

"For Child Advocacy Day, I shared my story with a Senator, [asking her to] extend a program from 30 days to a year. I was able to get her attention, and then she shared MY story. And that bill got passed."

Community Reflection Session Participants

Recent community sessions focused on presenting and engaging with data have equipped community leaders with additional ways to tell their story using data. FLOURISH led these sessions, presenting data and allowing participants to talk about the story behind the numbers and how they can use additional information to effectively deliver powerful messages. FLOURISH staff have also begun drafting a set of infographics that community members can share with elected officials to further convey their story and advocate for changes in maternal and child health systems.

FLOURISH is facilitating new channels of communication between community members and policy and systems leaders. In addition to providing community members with tools and training opportunities to be strong advocates for Black moms and babies, FLOURISH is providing opportunities for community members to put their advocacy skills into action and ensure elected officials are listening. They are providing space and avenues through which community members can safely and authentically share their stories and feel that their voice can make a difference. Reflection session participants note several ways they see this happening:

- **Facilitating direct communication chains:**

FLOURISH is helping to enable communication chains so that community voice more directly informs those in a position to enact change. An example of this was in 2018 when FLOURISH partners connected residents of the Clinton-Peabody Housing Complex with the Housing Authority in St. Louis to address the housing quality issues occurring in the complex that were putting infants at risk. That connection was made possible because the Clinton-Peabody Board President at the time was a member of FLOURISH's Community Leaders Cabinet. A serious mouse infestation in the apartments was impacting the health and well-being, and safe sleep practices, for resident families. FLOURISH launched a community engagement campaign that brought together Clinton-Peabody residents, the Housing Authority, Health Department, legal services, and local elected officials. Residents had an opportunity to share their experiences, concerns, and needs, and hear directly from officials what they planned to do to address the problem. Facilitating those connections helped to elevate the issue and amplify the voice of the community, putting pressure on both the Health Department and Housing Authority to take responsibility for the living conditions of the residents.

- **Legislative roundtables:** FLOURISH hosts roundtables where community members can speak directly with local policy makers about issues most important to their community. One participant shared how the meetings gave her a chance to make a direct and meaningful connection with a local policymaker and share her own stories about what is happening in her community. Most recently, FLOURISH invited representatives to join a general coalition meeting where the Community Leaders Cabinet had an opportunity to practice their pitches in front of the elected officials and hear their feedback on its effectiveness. They addressed questions such as: were they telling their story in a way that an elected official would hear and understand? Does it clearly convey a call to action?

- **Legislative report cards:** Most recently, Generate Health launched the [legislative report card](#) to show how different elected officials are voting on issues that affect Black maternal and infant health in the St. Louis region and align with the FLOURISH priorities. The report card grades individual state legislators based on their level of support for issues impacting Black families, scoring them either as a champion, inconsistent supporter, or non-supporter. FLOURISH published the report card alongside an advocacy toolkit, which offers practical strategies and resources for community members to use to advocate for greater racial equity, family well-being, and community health. While it is too soon to measure the impact of these recently released resources, both the report card and toolkit are another way in which FLOURISH is creating a bridge between policymakers and community members. These resources aim to hold policymakers accountable to centering communities in their decision-making, while also encouraging community members to play a role in pushing for change.

“For the first time I felt they were listening. They called and followed up. Politicians got involved, other organizations got involved. People started showing up to meetings at Clinton Peabody. Resources started coming in, cleaning supplies, a lot of other things for parents. [Parents told me that it] made them feel that their voice made a difference and we can do this. This was like a miracle for me, to see policies and people working together for the community.”

Community Reflection Session Participant

- **Transportation support:** FLOURISH prioritizes coordinating transportation for community members who need this barrier removed to be able to participate in our initiatives. Based on community input, FLOURISH helps to coordinate rides with Uber or Lyft rather than bus tickets because community members have identified structural barriers to accessing public transit.

What more is needed to achieve this goal?

Community reflection session participants are clear that there continues to be a need to build greater awareness about the concerns and issues related to infant mortality to further activate community engagement and reach the hearts and minds of policymakers. With harmful policies continuing to be introduced at the local and national levels, there is an ongoing pressing need to increase policymaker understanding of the root causes of infant mortality, the impacts of structural racism (such as the impacts of housing on health equity), and why certain policies are harmful to the health and wellbeing of Black families and babies. There have been heartbreaking policy losses despite great investment of time and energy among community activists, all because elected officials are not following through. There is a recognition that FLOURISH is doing strong advocacy work to hold elected officials accountable, but more is needed to ensure they are enacting policy and systems changes that centers communities and the experiences of those most impacted. Reflection session participants suggest a few specific tactics that FLOURISH can take to further increase community voice to put pressure on policymakers:

- **Leverage the power of social media:** There is a strong sense among reflection session participants that FLOURISH should lean into the use of social media (including the hugely popular TikTok platform) to lift up community voice, more widely share stories, build awareness about infant mortality, and provide information about resources available to families. Using the power and popularity of social media can help to meet families where they are and serve as an effective vehicle for sharing information, particularly during these isolated pandemic times. FLOURISH has already begun taking steps in alignment with these suggestions. They have recently begun a new contract with a social media expert who provides content creation and online engagement, as well as contracted with a marketing specialist who will help with branding.
- **Build off the strength of the storytelling approach:** Stories and personal testimonies from families impacted by infant loss have been a powerful force in building awareness and driving advocacy efforts. Stories are helping to normalize experiences and mitigate the feelings of shame, overwhelm, grief, and confusion that families experience, while helping families to feel less alone and know where to find resources to help them cope. As one community member reflects, sharing their story has helped families that are currently navigating this experience and the

"When we **showcase our stories**, that helps people and empowers them. We were taught to have shame or be embarrassed about these things. Nothing wrong with sharing your story, it is a big way to help people, let them **know they're not alone**. You don't know who is watching or listening. I've had people come to me to say that I've helped them. I was going through it, and hearing what you said really helped me. Being more vulnerable to help people avoid some of the obstacles that we went through."

Community Reflection Session Participant

"If parents hold their ground, advocating on social media, and **making their voices heard**, they can demand that partners align their voice with theirs. That's the trend I've been seeing, not only in this region but in other regions."

Community Reflection Session Participant

system. FLOURISH can build off this valuable approach by continuing to offer trainings and further cultivate a culture of storytelling as a way to increase awareness and engagement. FLOURISH staff also share that they would like to be more intentional in how they are capturing stories and gathering consent from people in where and how those stories are shared.

- **Keep educating the community about relevant policies in the works:** Reflection session participants see FLOURISH playing a valuable role in keeping the community apprised of policies that could impact the health and wellbeing of Black families and help to mobilize support for or against impending legislation. Participants are eager for FLOURISH to help them know not just when to vote, but what is coming up on the ballot, what issues are at stake, and who their representatives are. One participant suggests an occasional forum for community leaders and organizers to help them understand what is coming up and how they can rally support.
- **Consider ways to build the pipeline to policymaker:** FLOURISH is recognized for its successful approach to community engagement, and some reflection session participants see that model helping to nurture future policymakers and ensure that those crafting decisions and enacting policies are representative of the community.

Goal 2: Black providers are elevated as experts

How is FLOURISH making progress toward this goal?

Through its governing body and grant review committee, FLOURISH assigns true decision-making authority to members of the community. The Community Leaders Cabinet (CLC), the community-based governing body for FLOURISH centers the voices and expertise of Black community leaders and charges them with setting priorities. The CLC's leadership is shaping the work of the initiative. For example, the CLC vetted a series of racial equity capacity building trainings that will be offered to FLOURISH grantee organizations in 2022. Coming together within the CLC has supported Black community leaders to learn, connect, and collaborate with other partners, opening new doors and opportunities to support the wellbeing of birthing people and families. CLC members regularly share their own lived experiences, amplify Black voices in the community, and mobilize groups such as parent groups, doulas, and community health workers.

Funding decisions for FLOURISH are made by the Community Review Committee which is composed of leaders within the Black community who have been impacted by infant and maternal health challenges. Committee members read grant proposals and make funding decisions based on the priorities established by the CLC. Not only does the Community Review Committee serve to uplift the power and voice of the community, it also ensures that funding decisions are grounded in lived experience and contextual knowledge that lie at the root of the initiative's goals.

FLOURISH is putting monetary support in the hands of Black organizations and community members. As of 2021, FLOURISH has funded more than 100 organizations in the region, more than 70% are Black-led, grassroots organizations. Grant dollars are reaching some smaller, lesser-known organizations that typically face barriers to securing grant funding. Through its grants, FLOURISH has increased availability of high-quality, trauma-informed, culturally relevant services by resourcing Black providers who

"FLOURISH is creating more opportunities to bring resources into the Black community - making a statement this is where we believe change can happen and these are folks we think can do that most effectively."

Community Reflection Session Participant

are embedded and have established trust in their communities. The trust and cultural competence that comes from having service providers who are members of the communities they serve can be a crucial factor for services being impactful. For example, FLOURISH grantee Vitendo4Africa, which supports the advancement and wellbeing of African immigrant individuals and communities in Missouri, is equipped to support pregnant and parenting people with the linguistic and cultural competence made possible by the lived experience and shared identity of those providing services.

Additionally, FLOURISH grants are reaching some non-traditional partners beyond the typical health arena who play critical roles in addressing widespread social determinants of health that impact maternal and infant wellbeing. Examples include partners focused on recovery from narcissistic abuse and sewing circles for parents who have been incarcerated. Diversifying the network of stakeholders who are knowledgeable about and invested in the issue of infant mortality reduction contributes to a “no wrong door” network. Modifying grant requirements has expanded the types of individuals and organizations able to receive funding from FLOURISH beyond those that are 501c3s. This has put dollars into the hands of diverse partners with connections to the community supporting Black parents and babies along multiple dimensions.

Black community leaders and providers feel that their experience and their voices are valued.

Trainings, workshops, resources, and networking opportunities that FLOURISH provides are helping individuals and organizations further amplify their voice and collaborate with partners to enhance their impact. Engaging Black physicians as speakers is one way FLOURISH centers Black expertise and supporting Black community members to share their experiences and perspectives with policy makers empowers and assures community members that their voice and experience matter.

“I think being a part of FLOURISH and being able to express how we feel about all the policies and things going on in the community really helps. We are part of an organization that really listens to us and values our opinion.”

Community Reflection Session Participant

FLOURISH is elevating Black doulas and midwives, building their presence in the maternal and child health community, and recognizing their contribution to the health and wellbeing of Black birthing people and babies. One way FLOURISH is contributing to this change is through funding organizations that are training and connecting doulas. One participant shared that a scholarship grant from FLOURISH allowed her to become certified as a doula. FLOURISH community leaders prioritized expanding support for doulas which has attracted resources to the region to support organizations like Jamaa Birth Village in training culturally congruent doulas and integrating doulas into care teams at local hospitals. Elevating the voices of Black doulas and ensuring their seat at the table in the maternal and child health arena strengthens awareness that birth outcomes and birthing people’s experiences are greatly improved when doulas are involved.

What more is needed to achieve this goal?

For birthing people to have access to doulas and midwives as a part of their prenatal, birthing, and postpartum experience, these providers need to be more widely embraced as part of the medical care team.

- **Advocate to address health system hurdles that limit access to doulas and midwives.** Barriers related to certification and reimbursement constrain access to doulas and midwives. Doulas are not universally recognized by medical institutions as vital providers in prenatal, birthing, and postpartum care. Arguably, doula certifications add legitimacy to the care doulas provide, but requiring certification places onerous burdens on those in the profession and potentially further limits who can

work as a doula. FLOURISH stakeholders express that costly certification requirements push out doulas who cannot easily afford the expense and uphold while supremacy culture notions that values formal education over practice, experience, and other forms of expertise. Reimbursement for doula and midwifery care serves as a barrier both to those who can practice the profession and to those who need to access it. One participant shared that “even when some plans provide reimbursement for midwifery care, reimbursement values are very low.” Advocating to ensure that doula and midwifery care is covered by health plans and adequately reimbursed is an important step to helping birthing people have access to these providers.

- **Address barriers to doula care that have been exacerbated in the wake of COVID-19.** Hospital limitations on the number of people allowed in the delivery room has resulted in birthing people being unable to have their doulas with them during labor and delivery. Doulas being regarded as a “support person” rather than part of the medical care team leaves expectant parents to choose between having their doula present or their partner or other support person. Efforts to legitimize and welcome doulas as part of the professional care team can help make traction in addressing this barrier. In the near-term, while some hospitals are enabling doulas to virtually accompany their clients, other hospitals are not equipped and prepared to do so (e.g. having iPads on hand but not charged with enough battery). Discourse framing doulas as an integral part of the care team would help promote virtual access and shift hospital practices that are keeping doulas out of delivery rooms.

More work is needed to support and expand the workforce of Black providers. The community has a limited number of Black providers. These providers may be overwhelmed by the amount of interest from people who would like a Black doula, doctor, nurse midwife, or social worker. A forward-focused strategy to address this lack of representation would be to fortify the workforce pipeline in nursing, medicine, and related fields among Black community members. Examples could include scholarships or tuition support for Black nursing or medical students to support and encourage them to complete their education. A reflection session participant suggested raising awareness of social work as a career option within the Black community to help ensure a robust workforce made up of people who live in and reflect the community they serve. Reflection session participants also share that birthing people may not be familiar with community resources, and might not know how to find a Black doula or midwife and how it could support them in their pregnancy, birthing, and postpartum experience. While FLOURISH is contributing to elevating awareness of these community resources, amplifying the platform for messaging about these resources can help them have broader reach.

Increased community awareness and commitment to racial equity is needed across all providers.

In the near-term, more work is needed to improve the quality of care, including increasing race-based-awareness and understanding of implicit bias and systemic racism among all providers who serve pregnant and parenting people. As one participant shares, FLOURISH is bringing greater awareness of race-based disparities to the community, and yet more is needed to combat the systemic racism deeply entrenched within institutions and hospitals. One recommended strategy is anti-racist implicit bias training as professional development for home visitors; however this recommendation has been met with resistance at the state level, refuting the idea that implicit bias is a problem among home visitors. This example reveals how much work remains to be done to achieve a shared understanding of the pervasive role racism plays in impacting care quality and access and a collective commitment to solutions that promote racial health equity.

“We are still a **deeply segregated city** and region, with a **long history of systemic racism** that is pervasive in so many of our institutions. We're still in an early phase of building awareness of what does it mean to advance racial equity. Are the people that are holding up legacies of systemic inequities willing to change and create an equitable future for this region? FLOURISH is bringing voice to this and calling it out, but **we need more loud voices.**”

Community Reflection Session Participant

Goal 3: Entities that work on reducing infant mortality are coordinated and aligned

How is FLOURISH making progress toward this goal?

FLOURISH is serving as a powerful convener and connector, building a coalition of allies working toward a similar goal. FLOURISH has deep connections to the community and is creating spaces for those in the community to gather, share, learn, and partner together. These connections hold particular importance in the regional context of St. Louis, where several community reflection session participants commented on services feeling disjointed, with many organizations working on the same goals but not working together. Additionally, the increase in virtual meeting forums in response to COVID has facilitated some aspects of network building and collaboration. FLOURISH partners have increased the number and geographic reach of people they connect and engage with.

FLOURISH is supporting collaboration and alignment by bringing people into the same room with one another, hosting convenings, and facilitating new partnerships. Grantee presentations to the CLC created an opportunity to meet and learn about other community partners and the missions they advance through their work. The Home Visitation Collaborative and Perinatal Behavioral Health are working together more closely in coordination because of FLOURISH. One community reflection session participant shared her experience of how her involvement with FLOURISH helped open doors to deepen her work in the community: With a passion for supporting teen moms, one community member was raising small donations on her own time to create gift baskets for new moms. She started coming to FLOURISH meetings and connected with a nurse in the community who offered her access to a health clinic and prenatal classes as a place to connect with new teen parents. This newly formed partnership expanded her ability to support more teen parents.

FLOURISH is enriching the ecosystem of organizations and partners who play a key role in supporting and strengthening healthy families. Collaboration among partners doing related work including Integrated Health Network, the St. Louis Community College Community Health Worker Coalition, Forward through Ferguson, Alive and Well, Nurses for Newborns, and others is taking place in the region. This has included engaging and connecting those who may not otherwise be orienting their work to the issue of infant mortality, but whose work is in fact addressing it. Some of the Community Mobilization and Innovation grant dollars have gone to grassroots organizations, to continue doing the work they were already doing, but now as part of a larger initiative.

"Appreciate being able to **find people to connect with resources**. It's hard because (as social workers) we're so in the work, we don't have a chance to pause and find out are we doing the same thing? Are we aligned? This kind of opportunity allows for that."

Community Reflection Session Participant

"A portion of our funding has gone to **grassroots leaders and individuals and who have a heart for supporting Black moms and babies, and are doing it in a lot of different ways. They are doing this work because they felt really called to do it, or because of a personal experience that hit home. They would do it anyway, but with funding they can do this work in a way that is more coordinated and connected to larger goals.**"

Community Reflection Session Participant

Community voice plays a crucial role in alignment of efforts and FLOURISH has created opportunities to engage and uplift those voices. Structured groups such as the Community Advisory Board for home visitation, FLOURISH More (a housing group), and the Community Review Committee that makes decisions about FLOURISH grants provide forums for parents and community members to provide input that helps coordinate and improve services for families. Logistical and financial supports such as providing stipends, food, transportation, and childcare have been critical to supporting parents to be able to contribute their time and perspectives, when meetings were taking place in person.

"Parent voices and actions are leading the way for coordination and alignment. When the parents are aligned and have one voice, I see those partners lining up. [...] Systems, partners, and agencies are lining up with meaningful voices that are making a difference."

Community Reflection Session Participant

COVID response grants built new connections and trust with Black-led organizations doing work to support infant mortality in St. Louis. As organizations in the community were pivoting to address emerging needs of families, FLOURISH reoriented some funding and modified grant requirements to get additional funds out to partners doing critical work on behalf of Black moms and babies. FLOURISH learned about new organizations that were not previously on its radar, extending beyond those whose primary focus is maternal and child health. Through COVID response grants, FLOURISH expanded its lens to other partners supporting families and family vitality. Creating a grant opportunity with fewer requirements made those grants accessible to organizations that typically would not be able to apply, including those that are not registered 501c3 organizations. These shifts resulted in more investments in Black-led organizations and important trust building between FLOURISH and smaller, less-well-known, Black-led organizations doing work related to IMRI in St. Louis.

What more is needed to achieve this goal?

More is needed to support coordination and alignment of IMRI efforts in St. Louis. Truly coordinating and aligning efforts requires going beyond just connecting. Two key avenues to pursue to address barriers and advance this work are described below.

Additional opportunities to convene would support organizations to make collaboration even more robust. While some connections have been formed, there is a current need to find opportunities for partner gatherings (in person if possible) to build greater connection, collaboration, and momentum. Virtual engagement taking place due to COVID has been challenging and has disrupted ability to cultivate deep relationships. Participants shared the experience of missing the humanity of being in a room together. Grantees are asking for more opportunities to connect with each other and with the CLC. Those who have an opportunity to present to the CLC found it very valuable, want more of that. When it is safe and feasible to gather in person, providing childcare and transportation is crucial.

"It would be great if they were to have - not exactly a networking event - but maybe a one-day workshop where everyone who is working on this could work together on how to connect and reduce IM even more. If we have everyone in the same room, that would be a bonus."

Community Reflection Session Participant

Critically examine and address the role of funding mechanisms in perpetuating siloes. How the work is funded can be a barrier to regional collaboration and alignment and can result in reinventing the wheel. The state initiated a charge to focus on home visitation services without a landscape assessment of

efforts already taking place, while FLOURISH was already two years into establishing a Home Visitation Collaborative. This example highlights how duplication of efforts can slow and hinder progress rather than collaborating to amplify impact. Additionally, competition for funding among entities working towards similar goals creates barriers to greater alignment and coordination. While FLOURISH is having a very positive impact on fostering alignment and coordination, this remains an area where further efforts would be valuable.

"While there has been intentional focus on coordination, one of the barriers is that the funding mechanisms tend to perpetuate the siloes. Folks get a new grant to do something and we find ourselves reinventing the wheel."

Community Reflection Session Participant