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HEALTH

PREGNANCY AND FERTILITY

Advice through texting aims to reduce preterm births



BABY TALK: A text message on a BlackBerry from text4baby offers advice to pregnant women. (Kim Hairston / Baltimore Sun)

By Meredith Cohn

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Aiming to cut down on the high number of premature births across the nation, a new program will offer words of advice for pregnant women in a place that will be hard to miss: on their cellphones.

The free text messages will be sent every week and will include information about such things as

seeing the doctor, avoiding alcohol and cigarettes, and eating properly. Although it's just rolling out, the program — called text4baby — already has more than 18,000 women signed up for what's expected to be the largest nationwide health initiative using mobile phones.

Lead sponsors at the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition say they hope to improve the statistics: A half-million babies are born prematurely every year in the United States, many of whom then suffer from lifelong maladies. About 28,000 die before their first birthday.

"We're trying to address the problem," said Elizabeth Jordan, a board member of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies and a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing. "We have over 300 messages we send based on the mothers' weeks pregnant or the baby's age."

The program is paid for with in-kind donations and support from the mobile technology company Voxiva, as well as cellphone companies, health insurers and health product manufacturers. Government and nonprofit groups such as Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies partnered to ensure the messages are accurate.

Jordan said anyone can sign up and benefit, but the targets include Spanish speakers and disadvantaged women, such as those with lower incomes or without much access to computers or books. What most of the women do have are cellphones. About 90% of Americans have a mobile device, and the cellphone industry says 1.5 trillion text messages were sent last year, making phones one of the most widely used technologies. Sponsors also say text messaging is especially prevalent among women of childbearing years and minorities, who face higher infant mortality rates.

Premature births carry costs for the families and the health system. Private health insurers and the government through Medicaid spend \$26 billion annually on low birth-weight and premature babies, or about \$50,000 per child, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The costs for a healthy full-term baby are about \$4,550.

Text4baby got a boost recently when Aneesh Chopra, the U.S. chief technology officer, used his office to raise awareness for the program.

Chopra said the program, the first free mobile health service on a national scale, will be effective because text messages are instant and Americans have become accustomed to getting information this way. A new study from the Pew Research Center shows that more than a quarter of Americans get some form of news on their cellphones.

There are other examples of text messaging in the healthcare arena, such as efforts to remind patients with chronic illnesses about appointments or to take medications on schedule.

Judy Meehan, executive director of Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies, knows there is a lot of information given to pregnant women, and not all of it is reliable.

And many women don't have regular access to computers, books or even healthcare, and they don't know where to start. If all the expectant and new mothers can easily get the facts, they are motivated to make good choices, she said. Since research shows that mobile phones are almost always nearby, they might be the best means, she said. "We want to get that solid science in the mother's hands so

she can make good choices. We want them to get care. Or if they don't have access, this will connect women to a lot of resources they may not know about. The key is it's free."

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To sign up, women may text BABY to 511411, or BEBE in Spanish, to receive three messages a week timed to their due date or their baby's age. The texts can also connect women to public clinics and support services. For more information, go to *text4baby.org*.

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