



By Jose Ivan Cazares

Contributing Writer

March of Dimes is an international nonprofit dedicated to combating premature births and other birth defects with education, advocacy, research and funding. It supports local organizations, hospitals and communities from its Southland headquarters in Glendale.

“A lot of what we do is educating women and educating clinicians on the risks of pre-term birth and ways to prevent it. One of our programs called Becoming a Mom is a health education program implemented in several clinics,” said Mashariki Kudumu, March of Dimes maternal and child health director for Los Angeles and Orange counties.

The organization was founded by former President Franklin D. Roosevelt to combat polio, which crippled him. However, the organization shifted its focus as vaccinations dramatically reduced polio rates.

“We see ourselves as a convener and supporter of programs that help improve the health of all moms and babies,” Kudumu said. “Through our community grants we’re able to help organizations expand on the work they do, improve the work that they do or upscale.”

The latest March of Dimes grant awarded \$35,000 to **Maternal and Child Health Access**, a nonprofit providing many of the same services to low income communities in California. In addition to providing support and services, Maternal and Child Health Access tracks the racial disparity in infant mortality rates.

March of Dimes’ community grants are awarded to organizations working in areas with higher preterm birth

rates and large health disparity gaps. Kudumu said the nonprofit focuses on African-American and Latino communities because they have seen a larger increase in pre-term births in recent years than other racial groups.

More than a third of infant deaths were caused by complications related to pre-term births in 2010 according to a study published by [childtrends.org](http://childtrends.org), a nonprofit research organization. The study shows that black women have the highest rate of pre-term births. Maternal mortality rates are also higher among black women, according to a study conducted by the California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative in 2013.

In addition to providing funding through its grant program, March of Dimes places an emphasis on community building to provide a support network for women.

“One of the things that we’ve found is that social support is important to prevent pre-term births,” Kudumu said. “Prenatal care in a group setting versus going in alone reduces stress and lets women share their experiences.”

Kudumu spoke from personal experience when she said that caring for a premature baby is extremely stressful because of their delicate health.

“Learning to feed your baby, making sure they are OK and that they are going to survive is extremely stressful,” she said. “Whether it’s the hospital staff, the nurse or social workers, just having someone to talk to about your experience is very important.”

To enable women facing such ordeals to support each other, March of Dimes hosts a forum for women to connect. The support network also supports women who have suffered the loss of an infant.

Kudumu said that while access to medical care has increased through the Affordable Care Act, there is still a large disparity in the quality of care available to pregnant women depending on their economic situation.

“Our work really is about improving the health of all moms and babies, but we realize that while all babies deserve the best start, they don’t all get it. We’re working to improve birth outcomes and patient experience for all women, but we’re really looking at African-American and Latina women here in California,” Kudumu said.

#### INFORMATION BOX

**President:** Stacey D. Stewart

**Years in operation:** 68

**Annual budget:** \$12,903,000

**Number of employees:** N/A

**Location:** 700 N. Brand Blvd. Suite 950, Glendale, 91203

**BOOK CORNER:** ‘A Ruthless Love Story’ is first of a three-part series

**L.A. DIGEST:** Funeral services held for Joe Adams