The significant racial and ethnic disparities in pre-natal and newborn care in the U.S. create a shocking reality: our country’s minority children are twice as likely to die before their first birthday. Even if a child is born healthy, the high cost of diapers means that one in three American mothers struggle to provide diapers for their babies. This is why one of United Way’s focus areas is a healthy beginning to life, which is essential to helping achieve our goal of increasing the number of people who are healthy. One way to engage volunteers in this area is to host a community baby shower.

A community baby shower entails collecting, assembling and delivering supplies that help ensure a healthy start for newborns. Organizing a community baby shower generates visibility for United Way’s goals in education, income and health and creates tangible ways for volunteers to contribute. The shower can involve the whole community or just one corporate partner. Collecting, sorting and assembling baskets, bags or other containers of baby essentials also provides a team building experience and can be done at United Way’s offices or a company’s workplace.

GETTING STARTED

United Ways can tailor the experience of a community baby shower to fit the interests and needs of the volunteers as well as the beneficiaries – the mothers, hospitals or organizations receiving the gifts.

A few key steps include:

➤ **Brand the effort as a United Way experience.** Hosting a baby shower should be branded as a United Way experience as much as possible – from the first promotion of the activity to the way the shower gifts are delivered to the parents. Hosting the project at the United Way’s office or at the company’s workplace will help the volunteers understand that while another organization may be the beneficiary, the project is being led by United Way. Also consider including the United Way brand on the baskets or bags and other items to reinforce United Way’s role in addressing the needs of low-income families with newborns.

➤ **Choose a beneficiary.** Beneficiaries could include a hospital, women’s shelter or some other organization that serves newborns and their parents. Or, United Way could host a shower that includes the new and mothers-to-be, who may be clients of a local nonprofit. If you are partnering with a company, be sure to ask if there is an organization that its employees would like to support.

➤ **Obtain permission.** from the facility or organization to distribute baskets/packages and agree on the method of distribution. Methods may include: personal delivery by volunteers, distribution by facility administration, or delivery during a client visit to the facility.

➤ **Decide on dates.** Allow time for collection of supplies, creating the basket/bags, and delivery time.

➤ **Determine how supplies will be collected.** Supplies could be collected at multiple companies and assembled at United Way, or vice versa. Supplies may include: baskets, Born Learning materials, toiletries, baby products, approved items list provided by the facility, receiving blankets, knitted baby caps, etc.

Our office’s volunteer involvement with the United Way Community Baby Shower has been really special. People gave freely to fund the “baby basics” supplies we are giving to the expectant moms attending the shower, and we had such a good time shopping for the supplies and putting the baskets together. Now we’ll attend and work at the shower event as a team. It’s wonderful to have this simple but direct opportunity to connect with and support people in our community.

— Martha A. Mazzone, Esq., Fidelity Investments
United Way of Metropolitan Nashville holds an annual “Community Baby Shower” to provide Nashville’s at-risk mothers with essential baby items to help ensure a healthy beginning for their newborns. Community residents can get involved in a variety of ways: by contributing to a collection at their workplace; by hosting a shower in their home or other location; by attending a sort-a-thon to assemble all the items into attractive shower gifts; and by donating – via mail, the website or by texting ACTNASH to UNITED (864833). United Way of Metropolitan Nashville encourages a $10 donation to cover the cost of one pack of diapers.

United Way of Metropolitan Nashville provides participating companies with flyers that explain the challenges facing Nashville at-risk mothers and their newborns and invite employees to donate items. United Way of Metropolitan Nashville also provides baby shower themed boxes or bags to help collect donated items at the workplace. Women’s affinity groups and groups of friends who wish to host their own shower may request and receive a pretty “Baby Shower in a Bag” which includes customizable shower invitations, wish lists, and a flash drive including a stirring video showcasing the needs of Nashville-area newborns.

As the items are being collected at showers and workplaces around the city, United Way of Metropolitan Nashville engages a professional photographer to take family portraits of at-risk mothers and newborns served by United Way of Metropolitan Nashville nonprofits. United Way of Metropolitan Nashville retains the right to use the images and asks the agencies to pass on copies in different sizes for the families to keep – a family portrait they might not have otherwise.

Company employees, shower hosts and community volunteers are recruited through word of mouth, United Way of Metropolitan Nashville’s website, contact lists, and social media outlets to help sort all the collected items at United Way’s offices. In recent years, more than 150 volunteers from 40 Nashville area companies, organizations and individuals have gathered at the United Way offices to fill colorful bags with diapers, formula, clothing and other supplies mothers need to care for their infants. During one shower, more than 6,000 items were collected to fill more than 1,500 bags with items needed to give newborns a healthy start.

Volunteers are asked to wear their Live United T-shirt or are provided one at the door. The conference room is decorated with the beautiful photos of newborns and mothers, helping bring the face of need to the volunteers. United Way purchases sturdy pink, blue and yellow tote bags and volunteers fill the bags with the donated items, adding tissue and curly ribbon to make them even more attractive. The tote bags feature United Way’s logo and inspirational quotes, and may be used for toting groceries or other items after the baby shower items have been used.

Agencies arrive throughout the day to collect the number of shower gifts they need for their clients. The volunteers help load the gifts into cars and vans, giving them an opportunity to interact with the agencies that work with at-risk women and children. This also underscores United Way’s role as both facilitator and donor in the community. The shower has benefitted seven United Way partner agencies serving at-risk mothers in the community: Catholic Charities, The Next Door, Nurses for Newborns, Renewal House, Salvation Army, United Neighborhood Health Services, and YWCA.
Due to the success of the initial community baby shower in 2009, United Way of Metropolitan Nashville has made it an annual event, with more companies involved each year. One of the key reasons for success is that the branding and marketing of the effort is true to the nature of babies and baby showers. Using images on the newborns, and other warm and soft designs, speaks to the heart of many. People love the idea of helping an innocent child get the care they need, and are eager to participate again each year.

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley

United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley hosted its first community baby shower for more than 55 low-income new/soon-to-be mothers and their families at Roxbury Center for the Arts Hibernian Hall. Organized primarily by the United Way Women’s Initiative, guests were treated to a full dinner, the opportunity to win prizes and receive a free gift bag of baby items, and access to resources on pregnancy, fitness and nutrition for parents and babies, infant and toddler development, early literacy, financial stability, and more. The baby shower was so successful it will probably be an annual event, perhaps held in a different Boston-area community each year.

United Way staff and Women’s Initiative volunteers partnered to plan the event, recruit volunteers and secure donated goods. Planning started in earnest about four months before the shower, and the planning team benefited from knowing what had worked well for the two Community Baby Showers hosted by United Way of Metropolitan Nashville (see description in previous pages of this guide).

The staff and volunteers reached out to companies for employee donations of “baby basics” and to other organizations to solicit some of the larger donations of prizes that were given away during the shower, and also managed 40 volunteers to staff activities during the event. In order to help make it easy for guests to attend, the team decided to host the event in the high-needs area of Roxbury. The team also spent a fair amount of time determining the best day of the week and time to hold the shower, and ran the question by a parent advisory group. The consensus was that providing a meal on a weeknight would be a big selling point to potential shower guests, so the event was scheduled for Wednesday, May 11 from 5:00 to 8:00 p.m.

The guest list of new and expecting mothers was assembled with help the mayor's “Children Thrive” initiative, as well as nonprofits serving the Roxbury area. Initially United Way planned to email invitations, but found that many potential guests did not have access to email. United Way quickly created a print invitation that was distributed through the nonprofits to their clients, and guests RSVP’d to nonprofits as well as to United Way.

Not only did most of the guests who accepted the invitation come to the event, but nearly all stayed for the entire three hours. In addition to enjoying burritos or lasagna for dinner, guests could attend half hour workshops on early literacy, yoga/infant massage and nutrition and have a family portrait made by professional photographers who volunteered their time. If a guest participated in all three workshops, she had a chance to win a
one year family membership to the local YMCA. Children could sit at craft tables with volunteers while parents attended the educational sessions.

Bank of America provided financial stability counseling, and Room to Grow, which provides free, gently used clothing for babies and children, set up a boutique with mostly new clothes donated by the Women’s Initiative. Upon arriving at the shower, each new/soon-to-be mother or family received raffle tickets. Additional raffle tickets were given to guests who participated in an educational session, as well as tickets that could be used to “purchase” clothing at the boutique.

Numerous donated prizes were raffled off throughout the evening, such as family memberships to the Boston Children’s Museum, the New England Aquarium and the Museum of Science; gift cards to toy stores; a breast pump; a month of frozen meals; and more. Guests also could play typical baby shower games to win the prizes, e.g., a diapering contest, jelly bean count, tasting and guessing baby food and others.

Finally, each new/soon-to-be mom received a Live United shower goodie bag that contained educational materials and necessities such as baby bottles that had been collected by corporate partners and others. About a month before the event, United Way provided participating companies with a flyer with instructions and a wish list of items that employees could donate. The items were delivered to United Way and assembled in the bags. Some companies, such as Fidelity, also sent volunteers to help with the event. All told, 18 corporate and community partners participated in the shower.

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