

Northern Neck News

An ongoing mission

Richmond County EMS crews wear ribbons in honor of Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month

By Michelle Smith

Miscarriage and stillbirth are extremely common yet they're taboo topics. "No one wants to talk about a dead baby," said Emergency Medical Services chief Mitch Paulette, but his department is working to change that.

This month, EMS crew members have been wearing pink and blue ribbons hoping that people will ask what they're for. The answer is Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, a national period of recognition designated by President Ronald Regan in 1988. "Here we are 31 years later, and unless you've experienced it, no one really knows. There's really no advocacy out there," said Paulette.

Let's open up and talk

One in every 160 women will experience stillbirth and one in four women will experience pregnancy loss. This takes away more lives than car accidents and even gun violence, he explained.

Paulette knows first hand. He and fiancé Erin Koller, an EMS lieutenant, lost their son Liam on November 14 during childbirth. Determined that their son's memory will not be in vain, the couple is committed to promoting public awareness.

It's a very isolating experience, said Koller. "It feels like it's only ever happened to you. To other people, since you don't have a baby to show, it's like it's almost unreal, like nothing ever happened."

One of the goals of the EMS awareness campaign is to get people talking so they know they're not the only one and to provide a therapeutic outlet.

"We don't want anyone else to feel alone or that you have to hide and can't talk about your child. We talk about our child every day. We say his name. His life was short but it's going to mean something," Paulette said.

Wearing the ribbons and being open about their story has allowed Paulette and Koller to meet a lot of people who are relieved to have the opportunity to finally talk about their loss "Some people have been grieving for years and have never been able to talk about their child," said Koller.

Resources are available

When you experience child loss at the

hospital, they give you a packet with a funeral home option and some standard information about grief. They give you a memorial box with no baby inside and you have to start making decisions fast, Paulette and Koller explained. You're dealing with the loss but you're responsible for making preparations for what will happen to the child, and meanwhile the hospital is preparing you for discharge.

"We went to the hospital with a car seat and bag packed. We thought we were going to bring a baby home. [The loss] was completely unexpected, and like most people, we didn't know what to do," and there was no guidance said Koller.

By chance, the couple discovered Welch Funeral Home has a program where they'll take care of all of the arrangements and will perform burial or cremation free of charge. But the service is funded by donations and if people don't know, they can't donate, the couple explained.

Another goal of the EMS awareness campaign is to build awareness of the wealth of resources that are available.

Amid her search for information, Koller discovered and joined the Star Legacy Foundation, a national organization dedicated to stillbirth education, research, and awareness. She has since created the Virginia Chapter Resource Directory, which is a guide of resources broken down by region. It's available to anyone at starlegacyfoundation.org/virginia-chapter/ and has a wide range of information, including an organization with doulas that will go through labor with mothers delivering stillborn babies, organizations that make burial clothing and keepsakes as well as counseling services.

There's phone therapy, online groups and one-on-one counseling. You can find resources for dads, the grandparents and even for the living children who have lost their siblings. As long as you have a phone, a computer or access to the public library, there are groups you can connect with daily, weekly, whatever you need, said Koller.

Pushing for change

One of the reasons Koller was drawn to the Star Legacy Foundation is because of their advocacy work. There are numerous ways that families experiencing child loss could be better served, and Richmond County EMS is trying to do their part to draw attention to them in an effort to bring change.

For example, if you lose a child, you can't claim him or her on your taxes that year, said Koller. "So we have all the bills of a pregnancy and a birth but you don't get a tax break. In Virginia, you

don't even get a birth certificate. It's like it never even happened. There's so much we can do for parents to help them feel like their baby existed."

And "a lot of people don't get paid time off for a stillbirth. Luckily here [for county employees] we have things like FMLA and I could request time off. But a lot of places don't allow you to take time off because you don't have a living child. That's absurd, even when a child is stillborn, you have a major surgery and your body still has done all of the things as in a regular pregnancy," she explained.

Paulette said they have discussed these issues with legislators and have found support from Congressman Rob Wittman, Senator Ryan McDougle and Delegate Maragaret Ransone. But they would like to get more voices involved.

"We want to encourage people to advocate for themselves, to advocate for their friends and to advocate for their family. There's not enough people talking about it, so nothing is changing," said Koller.

Another way people can help is to participate in the free pregnancy research project that the Star Legacy Foundation is conducting in partnership with the University of Michigan. It's open to women who experienced a loss and women who successfully delivered. That research could help save more babies' lives, said Koller.

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Richmond County's EMS will wear the pink and blue ribbons every October, but the crew's focus on the issue doesn't stop at the end of the month.

Koller has given the department a wealth a knowledge about how to approach the topic with the public. And all members can, at the very least, direct those in need to sources of more help.

At any public event where the EMS sets up a booth, they will distribute literature on a variety of pregnancy topics, from knowing what to look for in a healthy pregnancy to dealing with grief from a lost child.

They are also trying to get local healthcare providers on board. "We're not trying to overwhelm anybody, but we would at least like to get them to distribute more information to their patients," said Koller.

"I don't care where we're at. We're going to continue to push this. It's a part of community health that's overlooked, under-researched and under-talked about. And who better [than EMS]?" asked Paulette. "When you lose a child, there are two things you can do, you can sit home and sink into grief or you can wear it on your sleeve and help somebody else," he said.