

# Maricopa County's *Think Syphilis* Campaign to Prevent Maternal and Congenital Syphilis



CONTRIBUTOR: Aisha Praag, Maricopa County Department of Public Health/Chickasaw Nation Industries

CATEGORY: Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)

Through the support of the Infants with Congenital Exposure – Surveillance and Monitoring to Emerging Infectious Diseases and Other Health Threats project, the Maricopa County Department of Public Health (MCDPH) launched the *Think Syphilis* campaign in 2022. This campaign was intended to inform the community via outreach and to provide educational materials for medical providers and their facilities to promote awareness of the re-emerging threat of maternal and congenital syphilis.

## The “What”

The number of infants born with congenital syphilis (CS) in Maricopa County increased dramatically from 13 in 2016 to 129 in 2022, an increase of 892%. In response to this concerning trend, MCDPH launched an initiative in 2022 to raise community awareness. The project aimed to promote syphilis screening and treatment, equip healthcare providers with educational resources, and distribute syphilis campaign materials among community members. Using this multifaceted approach to address maternal and congenital syphilis, *Think Syphilis* was adopted as a call-to-action slogan for the project's efforts.



Given that medical providers play a key role in preventing CS, the project aimed to advance provider awareness and knowledge by developing evidence-based materials and recommendations for preventing and treating maternal and congenital syphilis. The contractual field staff for SET-NET stationed at the MCDPH, along with the Perinatal Case Worker (PCW), provided ongoing support for local and state surveillance efforts around maternal and congenital syphilis. SET-NET is CDC's Surveillance for Emerging Threats to Mothers and Babies Network, which enables CDC and state, local, and territorial health departments to monitor exposures of concern during pregnancy and collect follow-up data on affected infants over time. Part of these efforts is to not only collect health information on pregnant persons and their infants via medical record abstraction and documentation, but also to conduct educational outreach for healthcare providers and community members.

During Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Awareness Week in April 2022, MCDPH officially launched the *Think Syphilis* campaign. The campaign was developed to highlight the use of effective communication campaigns and outreach strategies. This campaign addressed local prevention efforts via community outreach and provider awareness via printed



More stories are available at [stories.cste.org](https://stories.cste.org)

SUBMITTED JUNE 2023

educational materials around maternal and congenital syphilis. The MCDPH clinic providers, SET-NET field staff, PCW, epidemiologists, supervisors, and communicable disease investigators all participated in the development, implementation, and distribution of the *Think Syphilis* campaign.

As part of the campaign, MCDPH developed a comprehensive evidence-based maternal and congenital syphilis educational packet for community healthcare workers. The packet, disseminated via mail and email, included the following resources: (1) a Maternal Syphilis Screening Checklist outlining recommendations for screening pregnant individuals; (2) a Neonate Evaluation and Treatment Flowchart for OB/GYNs at delivery, providing criteria for CS staging, evaluation, treatment, and post-delivery infant follow-up recommendations for pediatricians; (3) the Maricopa County-issued Board Order emphasizing mandatory syphilis testing for pregnant individuals at the first prenatal visit, 24-32 weeks gestation, and delivery; (4) a QR code linking to the 2021 CDC Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) Treatment Guidelines; (5) statistics on maternal and congenital syphilis in Maricopa County and Arizona; (6) a "What the Literature Says" page containing peer-reviewed literature on CS manifestations and symptoms; and (7) MCDPH clinic business cards and promotional *Think Syphilis* stickers.

**Notable impacts of the project include increased communication and improved clinical practice awareness of CDC guidelines for syphilis screening and treatment.**

MCDPH developed *Think Syphilis* stickers, which were professionally printed in English and Spanish. During STD Awareness Week 2022, MCDPH began performing outreach around the Maricopa County community. MCDPH STD epidemiologists, the PCW, and SET-NET field staff went to various locations to highlight the STI services MCDPH provides and distributed *Think Syphilis* stickers, STI and syphilis brochures, the clinic's business cards, and male and female condoms. Additionally, an all-Spanish outreach was also conducted at consulates based within Maricopa County, refugee services, and Spanish-speaking clinics where we disseminated *Think Syphilis* stickers printed in Spanish and Spanish STI and syphilis brochures. These efforts aimed to reach diverse populations and promote syphilis awareness and prevention in the community.

### The "So What"

The *Think Syphilis* campaign followed the three levels of prevention (primary, secondary, tertiary) in public health activities. The Maternal Screening Syphilis Checklist and the community outreach were used as a primary prevention approach, intervening before health effects such as CS occur. The Neonate Evaluation and Treatment Flowchart for CS is intended to cover secondary prevention by screening patients to identify diseases in the earliest stages before the onset of signs and symptoms. Lastly, the Infant Follow-up section of the flowchart was included to involve pediatrics, and this conveyed the tertiary prevention level, to aid in the management of disease post-diagnosis and to slow or stop disease progression.

*Think Syphilis* campaign awareness outside of Maricopa County has been made during various presentations such as the Phoenix Children's Hospital Grand Rounds in May 2023, where 128 attendees received an electronic copy of the Neonate Evaluation and Treatment Flow chart, and during the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists surveillance coordinators call in January 2023, which generated a request from participating jurisdictions to share our provider education materials nationally.

Health jurisdictions that requested and received provider education packets include:

- New York Department of Public Health
- Delaware Department of Health and Human & Social Services
- Oregon Health Authority STD Program

- State of Alaska Department of Health
- Tennessee Department of Health
- Maryland Department of Health
- New Jersey Department of Health
- Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment
- Minnesota Department of Health
- Douglas County Health Department in Omaha
- Linn County Department of Health in Oregon
- Virgin Islands Department of Health
- Southern Nevada Health District
- Coconino County Health & Human Services of Arizona
- University of Arizona College of Medicine University
- Pima County Department of Epidemiology of Arizona
- CDC providers at the Syphilis in the South: A Summit Southern State at STD Engage 2023

The campaign has impacted other ELC projects such as the *Catalyzing Congenital Syphilis Prevention (CCSP)* program which collaborates with partners and offers STD testing on-site, health education, and referrals. For this project, MCDPH is providing training to partner agencies serving pregnant persons to help increase CS awareness and the importance of antenatal care. *Think Syphilis* educational packets and stickers have been shared with participating partners such as the South PHX Health Start Nursing Program, Nurse-Family Partnership Program- Home Visiting, and consulates based within Maricopa County.

The campaign has influenced the Arizona Department of Health Services Academic Detailing program. The program aims to improve outcomes for people affected by HIV, STIs, and hepatitis C in Arizona with a focus on encouraging providers to adopt and practice evidence-based behaviors to improve patient outcomes. MCDPH has collaborated with Academic Detailing by providing *Think Syphilis* provider materials and stickers to support conversations with medical providers and emphasize clinical messages around CS.

Collaboration is in place between SET-NET sites and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Dr. Sean Elliott is an infectious disease pediatrician and Medical Director of the American Academy of Pediatrics - Arizona Chapter. Dr. Elliott works on a limited edition mini-podcast series in partnership with CDC's Project Firstline for Pediatricians, where one of the topics focuses on infection screening and reducing transmission of CS. He was provided with the campaign's provider materials and highlighted these materials during his mini-series podcast in February 2023.




---

**466**

syphilis education packets have been provided.

**128**

providers attended the Phoenix Children's Hospital Grand Rounds.

---

Currently, to understand the rising rates of CS and provider needs in Maricopa County, MCDPH developed a CS Needs Assessment Survey and contacted **200** OB/GYNs via phone, mail, fax, and email. Overall, **43** completed assessments were received. We included questions to further assess how the *Think Syphilis* educational materials were received by the prenatal providers/facilities and whether any changes had been applied since receiving the materials. MCDPH plans to continue to analyze the results and share the findings via a published manuscript in a selected peer-reviewed medical journal.

A total of **466** provider syphilis education packets have been mailed out or electronically sent via email, in addition to the **128** attendees from the Phoenix Children's Hospital Grand Rounds that received copies of the Neonate Evaluation and Treatment Flow chart for CS. Overall, we visited **33** different locations across the county and made **10** social media posts about the launch of the *Think Syphilis* campaign to MCDPH social media followers.

Provider awareness and educational materials have been sent to:

- Pediatricians: **128**
- OBGYNs: **104**
- Midwives: **41**
- Emergency Rooms: **16**
- Infectious Diseases Departments: **5**
- Requested Provider Education Packets: **31**
- Additional Interventions/Presentations: **135**
- Requested Packets via MCDPH Provider Syphilis Assessment questions: **134** packets were sent to prenatal facilities in **35** different locations.

Community awareness and outreach included:

- **10** posted on social media to STDAZ.com, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Google Business
- **33** outreaches in the community to the consulates, unemployment office, immigration services, clinics, pediatrician offices, recovery centers, bars, bathhouses, adult entertainment stores, Spanish community outreach, and participants at STD Engage 2023 in New Orleans.

Practical implications and improvements were made by providing awareness and encouragement to other clinics, centers, or local or state health jurisdictions on how to carry out public health education campaigns in support of evidence-based recommendations for maternal and infant care for syphilis. Notable impacts of the project include increased communication and improved clinical practice awareness of CDC guidelines for syphilis screening and treatment. Moreover, the project has demonstrated how to prioritize community outreach efforts to help improve the quality of maternal and infant health at the clinical, community, and county level.

## The “Now What”

MCDPH has expanded the *Think Syphilis* campaign to include a Congenital Syphilis Fact Sheet. Recognizing that the majority of educational materials focus on prevention, we developed additional materials tailored specifically to caregivers of a CS infant, intended for medical providers and facilities to provide to their patients.

Since development of the *Think Syphilis* materials, the CDC has released its 2021 STI surveillance report highlighting Arizona as the leading state in rates of CS. We plan to update our *Think Syphilis* materials and continue distribution of materials in the community. Additional strategies for raising awareness are currently in consideration including social media, advertisements, and provider educational trainings.

MCDPH will continue developing innovative collaborations to tackle the emerging threat of CS. We have received positive community feedback and have been informed that the materials and stickers have created awareness and opened communications around syphilis. During community outreach, many community members have

requested additional brochures or condoms but did not know whom to contact. We will continue utilizing the campaign materials to increase outreach efforts and further establish our presence in the community. We will revisit our community’s ongoing health needs and continue to address vulnerable pregnant persons such as those battling substance use, facing unstable housing, and those at high risk for delivering an infant with CS.

MCDPH’s ability to influence other jurisdictions and implement a successful campaign using actionable surveillance data depended on informed prevention and treatment guidance for pregnant persons and their infants as well as for the providers that care for them. The development of this *Think Syphilis* campaign helped provide evidence for other local and state public health facilities and demonstrated the need to establish and refine elements of development, implementation, and dissemination of a successful health campaign for medical providers and the community.

---

Key contributors to this project include Stephanie Devlin, Maricopa County Department of Public Health.