

Need for Mother's Milk
Arabella Diedrich
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Walk into Mother's Milk Bank in Austin and you'll hear machinery humming echo through the short-staffed, nearly empty building. Once overstocked walk-in freezers are now barren of breast milk, the absence of donations as stark as the empty stainless steel shelves.

In 1998, two Austin doctors responded to the NICU baby need for human milk by forming the Mother's Milk Bank. Within one year of opening, the milk bank contributed to a significant decrease in disease cases among premature babies, said Recipient Program Director Melissa Fuentes.

Framed photos of these founding doctors hang in the entryway of the milk bank. Fuentes, and a quote painted above the portrait, says "the collective work of the volunteers and financial supporters who contribute to this effort are responsible for saving the lives of tens of thousands of babies."

This is the place women go when they give birth to babies mothers could hold in the palm of their hand, when formula companies recall their contaminated product leaving new mothers without other options, when mothers whose babies have died seek relief through a good deed, when a mother cannot naturally produce breast milk for her newborn, when one wants to destigmatize breastfeeding and learn that human milk is lifesaving.

During the pandemic, the milk bank's freezers brimmed with boxes and rolling carts of donated breast milk, so much so they had to add a third freezer. Fuentes said she attributed the surplus to new mothers having more time to feed their babies since work became remote over the COVID-19 pandemic. Producing more than what could be consumed at home, more mothers began bringing their extra breast milk to the milk bank.

"It was not normal to have milk coming out of our ears," Fuentes said.

As mothers went back to work, both donations and volunteer numbers dropped off. The only thing that hasn't dropped off is need.

"This donor breast milk is not just food, it's medicine," Fuentes said. "Babies never stop eating. Just because life has returned back to normal doesn't mean babies stop needing milk."

Fuentes said getting the word out about the donation site is more important than ever. Due to lack of donations, the milk bank is only able to ship half of the requested amount of breastmilk for nearly every order placed. Priority lies in the high risk NICU babies.

"We are spending a lot of time and energy on spreading the word on how crucial this breastmilk is," Fuentes said. "It's not like other donations. We need to gain the attention of fresh moms who

are actively breastfeeding.”

Breastmilk Equity and Education Program Manager Kristina Garrison-Clark helped develop an education program in February 2021 and has since furthered breastfeeding education and support groups that cultivate community offering cultural representation. New mothers can find a “breast friend” through the program who will go along the breastfeeding journey with them.

Garrison-Clark said the program aids Black families specifically due to Black mothers and infants having the highest mortality rate when compared to varying races of mothers and babies.

According to the CDC, Black mothers experience more barriers in breastfeeding including not only lack of knowledge but also lack of breastfeeding normalization within the community, absence of health care system support and struggle to balance work and breastfeeding.

“What's most important to me is to help people make informed decisions about feeding their newborns,” Garrison-Clark said. “It's hard to do so if you are not aware of all the options on the table. A lot of people are not aware of donor human milk. We want to make sure people feel comfortable breastfeeding.”

The insufficient education on the benefits of breastfeeding, and lack of awareness about donor human milk, attributes another factor to why they are short on milk donations, said Garrison-Clark. Generating ideal partnerships has been difficult with the ups and downs of the pandemic.

The milk bank has an onsite room dedicated to educational support groups, but like the freezers, it remains mostly empty.

“It's like we are doing a dance with COVID. It's very stop and go,” Garrison-Clark said. “We wanted to have these meetings in-person, but we had to do everything virtually. There was a lot of waiting, essentially, we created a space where we offer virtual and in-person groups. We provide training on the breastfeeding process and what it means to have a feeding friendly environment.”

To further public outreach, Garrison-Clark said holding informational meet and greets at community resource fairs is where they find a lot of Black mothers who would benefit from the program.

“It is so hard to figure out how to locate these Black families after gentrification in Austin,” Garrison-Clark said. “The makeup of communities is changing so the way we reach out is changing as well.”

Despite the disappointing shortage of breast milk donations, Garrison-Clark said the most satisfying number has been how many Black mothers the program has reached.

Donor Services Manager Alison Rogers, responsible for shepherding prospective donors through

the donation process as quickly as possible, said she attributes the shortage to the shift in workforce but mainly impracticality.

“Pumping is such hard work. It’s uncomfortable,” Rogers said. “No one ever says they love pumping. It’s not a practical experience.”

Mothers are still pumping but they no longer keep extra stashes of breastmilk for feeding their baby while at work, said Rogers. Furthering impracticality, with the donor application process, applicants are understandably required to have doctor-signed blood work to ensure their milk is safe for donating.

“(Donors) going for blood work are going out of their way to help others,” Rogers said. “We are incredibly grateful to them, really, we have them on a pedestal.”

Since the milk bank is a non-profit, there is also no monetary reward for donors. These mothers who donate do so out of the kindness of their hearts, seeing saving a baby’s life rewarding enough, said Rogers.

“These new mothers are excited to pay it forward. Especially if they were also recipients because they have seen the impact milk has in the NICU,” Rogers said. “It is heartbreaking to walk through (the NICU). All you want is that baby to be at home with their family.”

Throughout a hallway in the milk bank hangs strands of royal blue and teal ribbons. On the blue ribbons are photos of donor mothers’ babies and on teal are before-and-after photos of NICU babies. Before, these babies are hooked up to handfuls of wires, some barely the size of a palm, and one with his father’s ring hanging like a bracelet on his wrist. After, some now entering elementary school, are smiling faces of babies and kids who received a lifesaving donation.

With donors immortalized on that wall, it is clear the milk bank staff will remember the value of any contribution.

They will also never forget that they’re still falling short on donations. One volunteer, gloved and sporting a hairnet, packs the next half-filled order for babies in need.