



***Abundance, joy & dignity
Healing the Black birth
experience***

***Featuring
Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA***

This time on Code WACK!

Why are Black people so vulnerable to maternal and infant mortality - and what's being done about it? What will the closing of a maternity ward in South Los Angeles County – a trend happening around the country – mean for local residents there?

To find out, we spoke to **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**, the first Black director of [Maternal Child and Adolescent Health for LA County's Department of Public Health](#). Dr. Franklin is a systems transformation leader with over 25 years of experience in organizational development, community engagement and communications strategy. This is the first in a two-part series with Dr. Melissa Franklin.

SHOW NOTES

WE DISCUSS

Dr. Franklin, you call yourself a “healer of systems.” What does that mean and which systems do you heal?

“Ooh, that's a great question. I call myself a healer of systems because I believe that's where the change and the abundance and the joy that we're hoping to see in our communities, where I believe that it needs to start.

“Up until recently, I think we all could really say that our systems were very much system-centered, very much about continuing to do what they do, not with a mal intent necessarily, but really just continuing the habits that were developed when they were framed or formed.

“And we've all found that they're not necessarily family-centric, or person-centric and one thing I really do have to say about the advancements in public health and other public systems as well is that we're starting to shift our awareness, our thinking.

“We're ... evolving ourselves and coming together on behalf of families that start ... with the person at the center, but also acknowledges some of the challenges of the past and that our systems were built on inequities, on injustice, on harms that were done previously...” - **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

As Director of Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health for Los Angeles County, you help coordinate efforts to reduce Black infant and maternal mortality rates. What's your relationship to this issue?

“... I became involved in the issue ... by way of my personal connection. I am a Black woman who both my preemies were born three months premature, actually 27 weeks, five days *to the day*, three years apart.

“You know, I had a traumatic birth experience. I almost died in the birth of my second child and that really was my launch into this work. ... I really

thought it was something I had done or not done, despite at that time having an MBA, a stable relationship, a home, a career, prenatal appointments, healthy weight, healthy eating. . .

“And yet I had this outcome and it wasn't until I was sitting in a meeting actually at [First 5 LA](#) when I started being exposed to the disparity numbers that I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, all these years, I carried that guilt,’ and it just melted off and was like replaced with resolve to make a change.

“By way of, I guess, serendipity I had the opportunity to interview over 100 Black women with their experiences with the healthcare system, maternal care, and racism and what came up over and over and over were these very similar stories of how they were treated in life, in that provider setting experiences with pregnancy loss, infant loss, premature birth.

“And, you know, my mind was just blown.” – **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

Talk about the impact of maternal mortality in the Black community.

“...whether it's one, two or 20 [who are lost], it's heartbreaking and concerning. You know, these are lives. These are families. It's not just the partner who's impacted. It's a baby growing up without their mom, it's a family without their loved one, right?

“... our work is very much fueled by working to stop deaths, you know ... All people who can become pregnant should be able to have their babies and live and their babies live too, right?”

“If that's something that they decide to do, they should be able to do that, again, with joy and abundance, health and well being and looking out to a great and beautiful future with their child. And until that is achieved for all folks and for Black folks ... we're going to continue doing what we're doing ... to show up for families and advocating for respectful, culturally respectful, humane care with dignity –

"And ... I would add high expectations that *survival is not the bar*, that beyond that, you know, *having a beautiful experience that you reflect on, and think back on as being what you had hoped for*, as being the bar." – **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

Helpful Links

[Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health](#), *County of Los Angeles Public Health*

[As hospitals close labor wards, large stretches of California are without maternity care](#), *CalMatters*

[Los Angeles County had an ambitious plan, but it's still struggling to shrink the Black infant death rate](#), *Center for Health Journalism, USC Annenberg*

[Advocates shine light on racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality rates in LA County](#), *ABC News*

[First 5 LA](#), *Los Angeles County Children and Families First - Proposition 10 Commission*

[Los Angeles County African American Infant and Maternal Mortality Initiative](#), *County of Los Angeles Public Health*

Episode Transcript

Read the full [episode transcript](#).

Biography:

Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA

Dr. Melissa R. Franklin is a system transformation leader with over 25 years of experience in organizational development, community engagement and communications strategy for public agencies, philanthropic organizations, and community initiatives.

She is Los Angeles County's first Black Director of [Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health \(MCAH\)](#), which is housed in the Department of Public Health's Health Promotion Bureau.

Appointed MCAH Director in November of 2022, Dr. Franklin oversees programs that support the health and wellbeing of pregnant individuals, infants and children, including the African American Infant and Maternal Mortality Prevention Initiative (which she co-designed and launched in 2018 as a Pritzker Fellow), Black Infant Health Program, Asthma Coalition, Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Help Me Grow, Home Visitation Programs, Nurse Family Partnership, and Positive Youth Development.

With expertise in social justice, birth equity, communities of color, prior to joining LAC DPH Dr. Franklin consulted on launch of initiatives for the Bezos Foundation, Pritzker Foundation, Los Angeles County Department Public Health, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, California WIC Association, PHFE-WIC, place based initiatives, and home visiting programs.

She also has experience in the education sector, having provided communications and stakeholder engagement consulting services to the LA County Office of Education Office of Early Head Start/Head Start, Compton Unified School District, and Los Angeles Unified School District.

She co-developed a framework of promising practices focused on addressing barriers to Black student opportunity in public K-14 systems. Dr. Franklin earned a Doctor of Education in Organizational Change and Leadership from the University of Southern California, a Master of Business Administration and Bachelor of Arts (Business) from Loyola Marymount University. Her doctoral studies focused on achieving breakthroughs in equity through the efforts of collaborative groups. The implementation of the recommendations from her dissertation won funding by a global philanthropic foundation.

In addition to her work in the County, Dr. Franklin currently serves as a member of the Board of Directors for CityMatch, serves as a director of a South LA-based dance and mentoring program, and conducts workshops for entities on her "Joyous and Just Leadership" framework. She is a mother of two children who brings to her work her own story of birth trauma and inequity. She is a resident of South Los Angeles, California.

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