

***A 'village of support':  
Changing the game for Black  
expectant parents***

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



***This time on Code WACK!***

***How can we, as a society, better support Black expectant parents and their babies in light of how vulnerable they are to dying in America? And what root causes must be addressed to do this most effectively?***

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

***SHOW NOTES***

# WE DISCUSS

***When it comes to Black infant mortality, how does Los Angeles County compare with the rest of the nation? And what are the root causes?***

"I don't know if you're aware of the CDC report that ... indicated that infant mortality has increased across the U.S. for the first time in quite some time. That is concerning. In L.A. County, our rates have been pretty stable, but the disparity remains, and that's why we focus on the difference. Root causes of it....

"We look at smoking versus non-smoking, education(al) attainment because those are proxies for things we typically think are impacting [mortality], and it still demonstrates that ***it's the uniquely harmed experience of Black folks in our country*** that's a root cause ... " – **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

***How is Los Angeles County responding to the crisis?***

"... doulas [are] really core to our response. Midwives [are] really core to our response. Engagement of fathers from a lens of supporting dads and partners in their support of their pregnant partner with the lens of preventing infant maternal mortality and being advocates.

"So really it is about igniting and activating the village of support around a Black person in terms of addressing the disparity, and I would have to add ... the various guaranteed income pilots in our county. We will be launching a guaranteed income pilot that's focused on pregnant individuals. You know, there is quite a bit of research that suggests that the reduction in stress, that access to no-strings attached income supplement has a positive impact on birth outcomes and so that'll be launching hopefully in 2024." – **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

***Tell us more about L.A. County's guaranteed income pilot program for expectant mothers. Who would benefit?***

"... multiple groups that are at risk of adverse birth outcomes, prior preterm birth, heart conditions, history of preeclampsia with a prior birth or high blood pressure....

"So it's multiple 'at risk' and our intents are to look at 'does it have a positive impact on birth outcomes overall?' – **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

***Is there a single intervention that is key to addressing disparities in Black infant and maternal mortality?***

"Oh, no, ain't no way one intervention's going to resolve something that has been so persistent and that is truly system wide, but a host of interventions or responses can, and I would add advocacy.

"Activation of the people in communities has been huge to this work. We have four community action teams covering five service planning areas, and there are folks that are looking at on the ground, community-specific responses, but also keeping the momentum around this work upfront.

"And I would have to say they were key during the closures - due to the (COVID-19) pandemic - keeping an eye on black birth outcomes and not losing sight of that, or not kind of pulling back because we had this really other very important pressing issue.

"Actually, we saw it as intersecting, right? And so that was just so, so much a testimony of the work of our communities on the ground." - **Melissa Franklin, EdD, MBA**

# Helpful Links

[Infant Mortality Rate Sees First Rise in 20 Years](#), *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*

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

[Guaranteed Income for At-Risk Expectant and Parenting Mothers](#), *American Rescue Plan Public Portal*

[The Role of Doulas in Addressing Black Women's Maternal Mortality](#), *Drexel University College of Medicine*

[Syndemic Perspectives to Guide Black Maternal Health Research and Prevention During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), *PubMed Central, Springer Nature*

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

[Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Named a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2023 Culture of Health Prize Winner](#), *Press Release, 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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