

# **REGION: Program will text healthy-pregnancy tips to expectant mothers**

A national "text4baby" program that allows expecting mothers to receive a steady diet of free text messages aimed at helping them have a successful pregnancy is drawing praise from local healthcare advocates.

The system debuted on Feb. 1, said Karma Bass, president of the Alliance Healthcare Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works to promote health and wellness in San Diego County, particularly for poorer people who may not have good access to health care.

All mothers have to do to join the texting program, Bass said, is text the word "baby" --- or "bebe" for those who prefer Spanish --- to 511411.

An automated system will swiftly ask for a due date and begin sending three text messages per week with helpful pregnancy or infancy tips. Moms with babies under a year old can also sign up.

The program was created by the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition with help from a massive public-private partnership that includes government, corporations, academic institutions and nonprofit groups.

The system is free, even for those using pay-as-you-go cell phones, because of a rare agreement between the U.S. Health and Human Services agency and all cellular telephone companies operating in the United States.

"We have wanted to do this kind of thing for a long time; they do it in other countries," Bass said. "The stumbling block was always that the United States was the only country that charged to receive text messages as well as to send them."

She said that all cell providers have agreed to waive the fees for the program.

All health care advice, which ranges from nutrition to labor and delivery, was written by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Cell phones, organizers hope, are ubiquitous enough to reach most expectant mothers, regardless of their access to a primary care doctor. Research indicates, Bass said, that 90 percent of Americans have cell phones and 18 percent have no land line.

More important, she said, young mothers most likely to need the free health care advice are also the most likely demographic to be regular text messagers.

She said the short nature of text messages ---- limited to 160 characters ---- can deliver information in very digestible doses.

"It's in a very approachable format. It's not this intimidating tome that your doctor hands you," Bass said.

The idea made sense to Dorothy Lujan, director of patient service programs for the Vista Community Clinic. She said that while the target audience of text4baby may be younger and poorer women, it works just as well for anyone who wants regular short reminders as they move through the stages of pregnancy and early motherhood.

"And the fact that this is free, that just increases the access for people," Lujan said.

Both Bass and Lujan said the same system could be used for other health issues, such as diabetes and hypertension, if the text4baby project succeeds.

"I think using technology for this type of thing is exactly what we should be doing," Lujan said.

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