



Saving babies. Supporting families.

**ADVANCING
EQUITY:
PROTECTING
BABIES,
EMPOWERING
COMMUNITIES.**

**2025
ANNUAL REPORT**

Bridging the Gap in Safe Sleep Education

This year, First Candle stepped into one of the most unexpected and urgent moments in our organization's history. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) — the federal agency that has guided safe sleep education for more than two decades — dismantled its Communications Office.

For nearly 30 years, NICHD served as the heartbeat of our nation's safe sleep efforts, producing and distributing hundreds of thousands of culturally appropriate educational materials used by hospitals, health departments, pediatricians, and families.

As a long-time partner in the Back to Sleep campaign, which helped reduce SIDS rates by more than 50%, we knew instantly what this loss meant: an entire infrastructure for reaching parents had disappeared overnight.

At the same time, Sudden Unexpected Infant Death (SUID) rates began climbing again. After decades of progress, the numbers rose from 3,500 to 3,700 deaths in just two years. The timing could not have been more devastating.

Yet in the face of this vacuum, First Candle acted swiftly. We collected, preserved, and uploaded all of NICHD's

digital safe sleep materials to our website, making them freely available to anyone who needs them. This was not simply a technical task — it was a commitment to equity. Many families, especially those in underserved communities, still rely on printed resources, and without NICHD, these materials would have vanished.

This moment became a defining theme of our year: stepping in where systems fall short, and ensuring families continue to receive the life-saving guidance they deserve.

"As Board Chair, I am proud of how First Candle continues to lead with integrity, compassion, and a deep commitment to advancing equity for the families we serve. This year's accomplishments reflect not only strategic vision, but the power of community partnerships and culturally responsive approaches. Our Board remains dedicated to supporting this vital work so every baby has the chance to reach their first birthday."

- Byron Johnson,
Chair, Board of Directors



Expanding Education Through Webinars

We began the year by centering fathers and their experiences with grief. In June, for Father's Day, we hosted **"Navigating Fatherhood After Loss,"** a deeply moving conversation with First Candle Board Member and Guys and Grief podcast host Brian Scruton. Brian shared the devastating loss of his son, Austin, and spoke candidly about learning to navigate life, marriage, and fatherhood through grief. He offered heartfelt insight into the different ways he and his wife experienced their loss, the challenges of being a grieving father, and the ongoing work of finding a path forward.

His honesty and practical advice created a powerful space for dads—many of whom feel unseen in their grief—and for anyone supporting a father after loss. This conversation quickly became one of our most impactful sessions of the year.

Following this, for NICU Awareness Month, our educational series continued with additional webinars designed to meet families and providers where they are.

In **"Beyond the NICU,"** pediatricians, psychologists, and our Program Director discussed the emotional and practical transition from hospital to home—how families rebuild routines, manage fear, and create safe environments.

In recognition of Baby Safety Month, our webinar **"Safe**

Sleep Saves Lives" brought together doulas, clinicians, and public health leaders to explore how culturally grounded communication can break down real-world barriers to safe sleep.

Finally, for Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, we hosted, **"Together in Healing"** created space for parents and grief experts to talk openly about community, coping, and life after loss.

Each session reinforced what we see every day: when families feel seen and supported, they are better able to absorb information, make changes, and begin to heal.

"A lot of ways men grieve is a generational perception of how men are supposed to provide, be the rock, and not show emotion and crying can be perceived as not being strong or being the stability for the family. I was trying to support my wife while managing my own grief. It's a tough balancing act."

- Brian Scruton, SUID parent and Vice-Chair of the Board for First Candle

"Advancing Equity is both our mission and our mandate. This year, we strengthened partnerships, expanded access to culturally respectful education, and supported families at their most vulnerable moments. Together, we are protecting babies and empowering the communities who care for them."

- Alison Jacobson, CEO/Executive Director



Growing Our Presence and Reaching Families Online

Social media remains one of the most powerful tools for reaching families quickly and consistently with evidence-based information.

This year, we expanded our educational content, grew our visibility, and collaborated with influencers committed to safe sleep and infant health. But our online presence is not limited to education. It has also become a lifeline for grieving parents. **Our online bereavement support groups provide**

a place for families to connect at any hour—day or night—when the weight of loss feels heaviest. These virtual communities allow parents to share their stories, honor their babies, and receive compassionate support from others who understand their grief in ways few can. For many families, especially those in underserved or rural areas, these groups are the only accessible support they have.

We also strengthened our Safe Sleep Guardian program, recognizing influencers, organizations, and companies who publicly commit to portraying babies only in safe sleep environments. This initiative is critical: research shows that parents are deeply influenced by the images they see online, and unsafe depictions can normalize risky behaviors. By uplifting leaders who model safe sleep consistently—whether through product photos, lifestyle content, or brand campaigns—we are helping create a groundswell of change across the digital landscape. Each Safe Sleep Guardian makes it easier for families to see, learn, and adopt practices that protect their babies.

As misinformation continues to circulate online, families rely on First Candle for trusted, compassionate, culturally respectful information. Every post, partnership, and support group extends our reach into communities that may never interact with medical systems yet face the highest risks.



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First Candle

Leading National Conversations



First Candle's Program Director, Destiny Stokes



First Candle's CEO Alison Jacobson with Dr. Hannah Kinney



First Candle, ROBE and Let's Talk Community Chat facilitators

Throughout the year, First Candle remained at the center of important national discussions about SUID prevention, grief support, equity, and the power of community-led education.

Our work continues to resonate because it is grounded in partnership — listening to families, collaborating with trusted local leaders, and building models that reflect the realities of parents' lives.

This year, we shared these insights widely:

- **At the National Perinatal Association Conference**, where our Let's Talk NICU poster received the Award for Innovative Models of Care
- **At the 8th Annual SIDS Conference and the Isabelle Davis SIDS Symposium**, where we contributed to global dialogue on research and family support

- **With our partners at 4 Kira 4 Moms and Reaching Our Brothers Everywhere (ROBE) at the March of Dimes Conference**, highlighting culturally responsive education for Black families
- **With Dear Fathers in Atlanta**, where we hosted a community event celebrating fatherhood and honoring one of our facilitators for his leadership

And critically, we brought our community-centered approach to two of the most influential public health convenings in the nation:

- **CityMatCH Annual Conference**, where we presented on how trusted community partnerships are transforming safe sleep education, father engagement, and perinatal support
- **AMCHP (Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs)**, where our Executive Director shared

the measurable impact of our peer-led models and how embedding programs within existing community networks increases behavior change and reduces disparities.

These presentations reaffirmed what we see every day: lasting change comes from community partnership, cultural humility, and deeply rooted relationships with parents and caregivers.

Let's Talk Community Chats: Where Trust Transforms Practice

One of the most powerful stories of the year belongs to our **Let's Talk Community Chats** — now in their third year and continuing to grow. What began as a safe sleep education initiative has become something far bigger: a space where families speak honestly about the challenges of early parenthood and pregnancy, and where community leaders, doulas, and even dads help guide the conversations.

Let's Talk is built on a simple but profound truth: people learn best from people they trust. Our chats are peer-led, held in familiar community spaces, and shaped by the voices of those who attend.

And our program is succeeding. Through follow-up surveys at one week and one month of attending a Let's Talk Chat, we learned that:

- **Back sleeping increased from 40% - 60%.**
- **Soft objects being removed from sleep areas rose from 40% to 70%.**
- **80% of attendees made at least one positive change to their baby's sleep environment.**



This year, we also expanded into the NICU at Grady Hospital, WIC offices, and pediatric practices. We trained more facilitators — doulas, grandparents, lactation consultants, fathers, and child safety advocates — equipping them with skills rooted in empathy, cultural humility, and the latest guidance.

Our work was recognized nationally with the publication of a white paper in **Neonatology Today**, highlighting the success of our Let's Talk NICU model.

At its core, Let's Talk is more than a program. It's a movement built by communities, for communities — and it is changing how families understand safe sleep, how they make decisions, and how they see themselves as parents.



99%

Reported increased confidence in safe sleep practices

Over 375

families served in 2025

Over 100

bassinetts mailed directly to families

Bereavement Support: Walking Beside Families in Their Darkest Moments

At the heart of our support is our 24/7 grief line, which for many families is the only source of comfort and hope available to them. We receive calls not

only from grieving mothers and fathers, but also from grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and friends seeking guidance on how to support loved ones through devastating loss. Every call reflects how far-reaching the impact of infant loss can be—and how essential it is for families to have someone who listens with compassion, without judgment, and without time limits.

Our online bereavement support groups continued to expand this year, offering parents a way to connect at any hour. These virtual communities allow families to honor their babies, share their stories, and find solace among others who truly understand their grief. For many, especially in rural or underserved areas, these groups are the only accessible support available.

Our commitment to honoring the full circle of grief extended globally at the International Conference, where we hosted a **powerful panel of SIDS siblings**. These young adults shared how the loss of their brother or sister shaped their childhoods, relationships, and identities. Their stories revealed how deeply grief ripples through families and underscored the need to support everyone affected by infant loss, not only parents.

62

bereavement kits distributed

650

families directly supported through calls, groups and resource referrals

35%

increase in members of our bereavement support groups

Everything we do is anchored in one belief: no one should have to face the loss of a baby alone. Families consistently share that First Candle was the first place they felt truly understood—a place where their baby is remembered, their grief is honored, and the light of hope begins to return.

The First Candle flame symbolizes the light that endures — even in the darkest grief.



With every conversation, we offer comfort, connection, and a reminder:

**Your baby matters.
Your grief matters.
You are not alone.**

“I never thought it would happen to me. I don’t think I could have survived this nightmare without First Candle and the other families in the support group.”

- Amy S.



ISPID: A Global Gathering Centered on Families, Science, and Healing

We were honored to host this year's ISPID Conference which was one of the most powerful and unifying events in the global infant health community. With the theme

"Fostering Unity for Infant Survival: Collaborative Approaches Across Diverse Communities," the conference brought together researchers, clinicians, bereavement experts, parent advocates, and community leaders from around the world.

More than 340 attendees joined to share the latest findings and advances in the study of SUID, SUDC, and stillbirth, reinforcing the vital role of global collaboration in improving outcomes and supporting families. Researchers presented cutting-edge data, explored emerging trends, and discussed new approaches to prevention and support—helping bridge gaps between science, practice, and lived experience. What made ISPID especially meaningful this year was the way families were woven into the heart of the event. A dedicated Parent Track offered opportunities for parents to learn, ask questions, and connect in deeply meaningful ways through sessions like "Chat with a Researcher" and a powerful siblings panel.

The conference also included a moving memorial service, honoring the babies whose lives were lost far too soon. Parents

described this ceremony as one of the most healing parts of the conference — a space where grief, love, and community existed side by side.

By centering parents while elevating scientific research and cross-cultural learning, ISPID underscored a message that resonates profoundly with First Candle's mission: saving babies and supporting families requires unity, compassion, and the voices of those who have walked this path.



"The success of this year's ISPID conference shows what's possible when we unite cutting-edge research, thoughtful education, and the lived experiences of parents. Bringing international experts and families together in one space strengthens our collective understanding and drives innovation in preventing SUID, SUDC, and stillbirth. Hosting this conference was an important reminder that only through global collaboration can we truly make lasting change."

- Andrew Rubenstein, MD,
First Candle Board Member



Safe Sleep Response™ Training: Changing the Way Families Are Treated

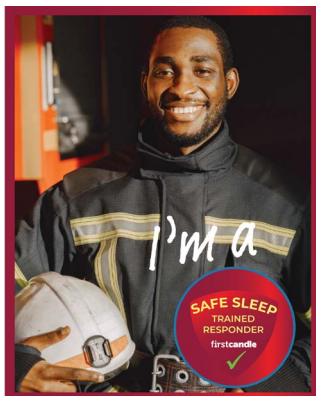
In too many SUID cases, families are treated like suspects. Trauma compounds trauma. Misunderstanding overshadows compassion.

This year, First Candle launched its self-study Safe Sleep Response™ training for EMTs, social service providers, child welfare professionals, and death scene investigators. The training covers the AAP Safe Sleep Guidelines, how to recognize SUID categories (including SIDS, accidental suffocation, and undetermined deaths), and how to support families with dignity, accuracy, and humanity.

This program is filling a critical national gap — bringing both education and empathy to the people who meet families at their most devastating moments.

"I thought the training was phenomenal! This is the first time I've seen the fire department educated about sleeping on the stomach versus sleeping on the back. Also, just a lot of the "why's" that come with the safe sleep practices. This is super important to make sure we're helping families and educating them when we see something that's unsafe."

- Fire Fighter



"I really enjoyed the course. The first-person story on her loss was very heartfelt and it gave me ideas what to do if I'm ever in that situation – the right way versus the wrong way to help the parents."

- Certified
Community
Health Worker



firstcandle.org

First Candle is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to saving babies and supporting families. We provide evidence-based safe sleep education to help prevent SIDS and other sleep-related infant deaths. We also offer grief support services at no cost to families who have experienced the loss of a baby. Through partnerships with hospitals, community organizations, and healthcare providers, we work to ensure every caregiver has the information they need. Our goal is a future where every baby reaches their first birthday.

first candle

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