AS ANY PARENT KNOWS, adjusting to life with a new baby can be hard. That’s especially true if the baby is medically fragile or there are additional challenges in the home. But Nurses for Newborns is there to help, preventing infant mortality, abuse and neglect when they are most likely—during the stresses of postpartum life. Sometimes, that’s as simple as providing basic supplies—diapers, formula, cribs, car seats and high chairs. Other times, it means guidance for mothers experiencing depression and domestic violence. The home visitation program founded by nurse Sharon Rohrbach has provided a safety net for babies in our region since 1991. Rohrbach worked at St. Anthony’s Medical Center and was concerned about the number of babies who did not stay healthy, or died, after release from the hospital.

“In some areas of St. Louis, in the shadow of some of the world’s finest health institutes, we have babies dying at a similar rate as those in developing nations,” says Melinda Ohlemiller, NFN chief executive officer. The organization’s greatest concern, she says, is the disparity between the mortality figures for African-American babies and other infant populations. More than 90 percent of the families the nurses serve, she says, live in ‘abject poverty,’ although every zip code in the city has received NFN help.

This year, the organization celebrates a quarter-century of serving 25 counties in Missouri and mid-Tennessee with its annual dinner and auction, Night for Newborns, April 17.

“We are so grateful for the financial support of our donors, and for our volunteers,” Ohlemiller says. The organization also receives donations of items from the community. It is always in need of portable cribs, diapers and wipes, and all “the things that keep a baby healthy and safe.”

Ohlemiller notes that nurses also attend to pregnant and homeless women. They visit shelters and maternity homes (like Haven of Grace and Almost Home) to screen for risk and educate new mothers about CPR, nutrition and when to use the emergency room. Nurses use laptops to keep electronic records and track babies’ development. Ohlemiller says the organization now is receiving national attention because of how well the babies are doing. “We hope other communities around the country can learn from our model,” she says. NFN has social workers and community health workers on staff.

Ohlemiller explains that infant mortality is complicated. “There are many factors at play,” she says. Having access to healthcare and knowing how to use it is essential, as well as knowing about things like safe sleeping and soothing a crying baby. “It is challenging for anyone,” Ohlemiller says, “but for some young families in certain situations, it is hard to get an infant through the first year.”

World Wide Technology is the presenting sponsor of this year’s Night for Newborns spring auction. All money raised, Ohlemiller notes, goes back into services. “With additional funds, we can serve additional babies,” she says, adding that currently 2,600 families receive help annually. Two people will be honored during the evening: Dr. Nanci Bobrow will receive the 2016 Champion for Families Award for dedicating her life to families in need, and singer-songwriter Javier Mendoza will be presented with the McGraw Milhaven Award for performing holiday concerts to benefit Nurses for Newborns for the past six years.