

Neighbors as Researchers

Community-Led Journey
Toward Birth Justice
in Tulsa, Oklahoma



Community Leading the Way

Black women are disproportionately impacted by negative health outcomes during their reproductive years.

In Oklahoma, maternal death rates for Black women are three times the rate of white women. In Tulsa, infant loss among Black families is nearly ten times higher than among white families.

These disparities reflect longstanding inequities in access, cultural competence, and trust.



This research was **co-led by Black mothers and families in Tulsa working alongside Oklahoma State University-Tulsa researchers.** Using a community organizing framework, community members were trained as coinvestigators and scholars to study Black maternal health and to document and change their own health systems.

Through arts-based story collection, researchers gained unique insights from mothers and family members about their healthcare experiences while growing their families.

Using paint as their medium, participants gave voice to complex emotions—birth trauma, systemic distrust, maternal joy, and future hope—creating powerful visual testimonies that traditional interviews might have missed.



What Did This Research Reveal?

Over three years of listening circles, arts-based approach to story collection, house meetings, and cohort-based training, the research surfaced four areas of action:

- Access to Information
- Insurance
- Postpartum Care
- Cultural Competence

Families described a system where providers may not listen or explain decisions clearly, where postpartum mental health screening lacks follow-through, where medical jargon replaces plain-language guidance, and where provider cultural competence determines whether they receive respectful, responsive care or face additional barriers.

Why Do These Findings Matter?

Community organizing, as a process, can lead to concrete impact in Black reproductive health. The research team and community members co-developed a list of recommended actions, such as:

- Clearer, user-friendly information tools and discharge materials.
- Straightforward insurance/coverage guidance embedded at intake and discharge.
- An integrated postpartum screening-to-referral pathway that closes the loop on mental-health follow-up.
- Respectful-care training and feedback loops to improve culturally competent care.

The goal is visible improvements families can feel and institutions can sustain.





How the Research is Shaping the Future

The team is asking hospital systems, the Maternal Health Collective, Oklahoma Birth Equity Initiative, the City of Tulsa, and community leaders to **commit to six months of co-led working groups focused on common-sense and achievable shifts to improve Black maternal health.**

This work also inspired many women who began as members of the community sharing their story to join the research team. One community member was inspired to return to school and pursue her Ph.D., so she could deepen this work and continue building ways for community stories to live as both knowledge and change.

Art as a Tool for Community Connection



Art by: Cynthia Soto-Render

This piece is an example of arts-based story telling utilized by the research team.

It holds the movement of many stories from the community coming together. It reflects how community voice, when honored and connected, becomes powerful enough to shift not just understanding, but the systems around us.

Green speaks to healing and possibility. **Orange** carries the energy of movement and change. **Red** holds urgency, truth, and lived experience. The shades of **Brown** ground the work in the depth, beauty, and diversity of Black life.

Black holds the weight of what has been carried, history, resilience, and the unseen. The butterfly wings speak to transformation, how stories, when held with care and in community, do not stay the same, but evolve into something that can move, reach, and create change. All of it moving together, just like the work.





Learn More

AcademyHealth supports community-led researchers producing evidence for community-driven solutions. Learn more about all Community Research for Health Equity grantees at:

www.academyhealth.org/CRHE