

Empowerment and Advocacy: How Having a Doula Can Improve Your Birth Outcomes

Introduction

Adverse maternal and infant health outcomes, such as deaths related to pregnancy, preterm births, and low birthweight births, continue to **disproportionately impact** Black, American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN), and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI) birthing people. Recent cuts to Medicaid funding and eligibility are also expected to make accessing quality reproductive care **more difficult** for all pregnant and postpartum people, and particularly those who are Black and/or Indigenous. In 2023, there were 49.4 pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 births for Black birthing people, compared to 14.9 deaths for White birthing people, **while recent data** show that the majority, 87 percent, of all maternal deaths in the US were preventable. Birthing people are confronting these alarming statistics at the same time as hearing about or personally having negative birth experiences. As a result, many birthing people are looking for community support for pregnancy and birth, specifically through doula services.

What is a Doula?

Doulas have a very specific scope of work when supporting birthing individuals, which includes **providing** client-centered care, education, and advocacy. While often confused with midwives, doulas are different because they do not provide any type of medical support, such as performing cervical exams, repositioning a baby, checking vitals, or delivering/ “catching” babies. Unlike midwives, doulas are **trained community birth workers** that provide culturally appropriate, non-clinical, emotional, physical, and informational support to the birthing people (and sometimes their support persons) at home, during appointments, in hospitals, and at birthing centers before, during, and/or after birth.

There are many types of doulas, including those who specialize in support related to birth, the postpartum period, fertility, bereavement, and the end-of-life transition. While the evidence of doula work dates to ancient times, the use of the name “doula” can be **traced** back to 1969 in the US. The name may vary throughout time and across cultures, but the role remains the same.



Could You and Your Family Benefit by Having a Doula on Your Birth Team?

Evidence shows that birthing people benefit significantly from the support doulas provide, with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) **noting** that, “in addition to regular nursing care, continuous one-to-one emotional support provided by support personnel, such as a doula, is associated with improved outcomes for women in labor.” Birthing people who have had doulas also **report positive experiences and receiving helpful services**, particularly related to mental health, noting that doulas can advocate for you and say this person needs the best care, because...they’re going through mental health and we don’t just want to get them medication, we want to get them resources.”



Some of the benefits noted in these studies include:

- Shortened labor
- Decreased need for pain management drugs
- Fewer operative deliveries
- Fewer reports of dissatisfaction with the experience of labor
- Less likely to have a cesarean birth
- Less likely to have a newborn with a low 5-minute **Apgar score**
- Improved rate of **spontaneous vaginal birth**

Does your Insurance Cover Doula Services?

27 states and Washington, DC, either currently include or are working on including Medicaid (state insurance) coverage for doula care. Additionally, Rhode Island and Louisiana require private insurers to cover doula care, while California and Utah require some private insurers to cover doula care, as well. It is important to check with your insurer **directly** for specific information about what services can be covered for you and your family. Your insurance card should have a phone number you can call to get specifics about what your plan covers. To avoid surprise costs, make sure you contact your insurer before receiving these services.

If your insurance does not cover doula services, there are still other avenues to working with a doula. You can consider paying out-of-pocket or researching if any local community doula organizations, doulas in training, or private doulas provide pro-bono services.

Lastly, many people seeking doula care find connections through word of mouth or through groups on social media; however, it is always a good idea to verify any connections made online.

Recognizing the increase in state Medicaid programs covering doula services, AcademyHealth’s Evidence-Informed State Health Policy Institute and the University of Pittsburgh are conducting a study to identify the most effective ways that state Medicaid programs can implement doula care to improve postpartum health among Black people and people of color. By bringing together six state Medicaid programs and their university research partners, as well as doula organizations, **Project DREAM** (Doula Research for Equitable Advances in Medicaid Pregnancy Health) will draw on both quantitative Medicaid outcomes data and the perspectives of doulas and Medicaid enrollees to provide much-needed evidence on how doula programs can promote positive birth outcomes and reduce maternal health disparities.

How Can You Find a Doula in Your State?

In addition to checking with your insurance, it can be helpful to ask your provider (primary care physician, obstetrician/OBGYN, nurse practitioner, etc.) for a recommendation or information about doula services in your area.

There are some online directories to find doulas near you:



DONA International doula directory



Meela search engine



Mae

And some states have state-specific registries, like this one in Michigan:



search

MDHHS Doula Registry