

Public Health Leaders and Health Care Practitioners Call Upon Massachusetts State Legislators and Other Policy Makers to Advance Proven Policies Regarding Maternal Health Safety and Choice (July 2022)

At a time when women's reproductive health options are being rolled back in many states across the country, Massachusetts has already passed important legislation to preserve access to abortion. This will help those needing abortion services both in Massachusetts as well as elsewhere.

On June 1st, however, we had an unfortunate setback regarding our efforts in this state to address persistent disparities in maternal care and lack of choice in childbirth. The MA Joint Committee on Healthcare Financing (HCF) sent "to study" 9 of 12 bills related to maternal health and equity – despite the strong support for these bills expressed by the MA Department of Public Health as well as the MA Legislature's Special Commission on Racial Inequities in Maternal Health (full text here: <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/192/SD3168/Bills>).

In addition, during an era when freestanding birth centers are needed more than ever as we face the likelihood of repeated pandemics, the only two such birth centers in Eastern MA now face possible permanent closure. (There are fortunately exciting plans to open the new Neighborhood Birth Center in Roxbury/Dorchester during 2023, but this Center will not come close to meeting the needs already expressed by families in this region.) This 2020 Boston Globe op ed by local physicians (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/18/opinion/massachusetts-mothers-need-more-childbirth-options/>) underscores the importance of out-of-hospital birthing options for healthy women with uncomplicated births both in terms of avoiding infection and freeing up hospital beds for those in greatest need.

As public health leaders, we call upon policy makers to rectify this situation. A June 14 Boston Globe article (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2022/06/13/metro/cuts-maternal-health-services-ignite-protests/>) underscores the frustration of families who have long benefited from freestanding birth center care (200 people turned out to protest the planned closing of the North Shore Birth Center), and Cambridge residents are now gearing up to launch a campaign to ensure that the Cambridge Birth Center will reopen as soon as possible. It is unacceptable that Massachusetts now has just one freestanding birth center (the Seven Sisters Midwifery and Community Birth Center in Amherst, MA). We can do better.

Decades of research and recommendations from national and global expert organizations and academics have pointed to fully-integrated midwifery as key to preventing up to 85% of maternal deaths worldwide. This research demonstrates significant reduction in unnecessary interventions, increased satisfaction of women and families, increased breastfeeding rates and cost savings associated with community birth options (including integrated homebirth and birth center care). Ironically, Massachusetts is behind our New England neighbors in recognizing the importance of more fully integrating midwives who practice outside the hospital setting.

Many who live in Massachusetts – including consumers, health care providers, and organizations such as the League of Women Voters, Reproductive Equity Now, ACLU of MA, the Union of Minority Neighborhoods, Planned Parenthood, YWCA of Southeastern MA, the

Resilient Sisterhood Project, and Mass NOW – have voiced the need for change over multiple public hearings. These bills will help to dismantle systems of oppression that make Black women even in our own state two to three times more likely to die of childbirth than their white counterparts. No longer would we be in the same company as those 13 other states (including Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, and Nebraska), where pregnant people’s access to high quality, community birth settings are restricted despite the plethora of evidence exposing the damage done by such restrictions.

Massachusetts can do better, and given the decades of solid research that supports the expansion of safe, midwifery-centered out-of-hospital birthing options, we must act swiftly to ensure that this legislation moves forward and that access to freestanding birth centers is both preserved and expanded.

LIST IN FORMATION

Lucy Candib, MD, Professor Emerita, Dept. of Family Medicine and Community Health UMass Chan Medical School, Worcester MA

Laurent Delli-Bovi, MD, FACOG

Judith Herman, MD.

Sarah Lassey, MD, FACOG

Mitchell Levine, MD, FACOG

Jane Maffie-Lee, MSN, FNP-BC.

Karen Norberg, MD

Marcie Richardson, MD, FACOG

Alexandra Spadola, MD, FACOG

Phillip Stubblefield, MD, FACOG

For Reference:

The most recent report documenting the advantages of having more out-of-hospital birth settings is from the National Partnership for Women and Families:
<https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/health/maternity/community-birth-settings.html>.

The text of two of the bills that were sent to study: <https://legiscan.com/MA/text/H4640/2021> and <https://legiscan.com/MA/bill/H3881/2021>.