

what to expect project

Safer Deliveries, Healthier Babies.

The What to Expect Project educates, empowers, and advocates for all moms in need worldwide.

Context

Every year, about 700 women die from complications of pregnancy, with a disproportionate number of them being women of color. Over 60% of those deaths are preventable. Pregnancy-related deaths and complications can occur during pregnancy, at delivery, and postpartum (CDC, 2019). There are vast disparities in care based on where a mom lives, her ability to pay and the color of her skin. Access to responsive, culturally sensitive, skilled care before, during, and after childbirth can save the lives of women and their newborns.

Doula: A trained professional who provides continuous physical, emotional and informational support to a mother before, during and after childbirth to help her achieve the healthiest, most satisfying experience possible (Dona International, 2022).



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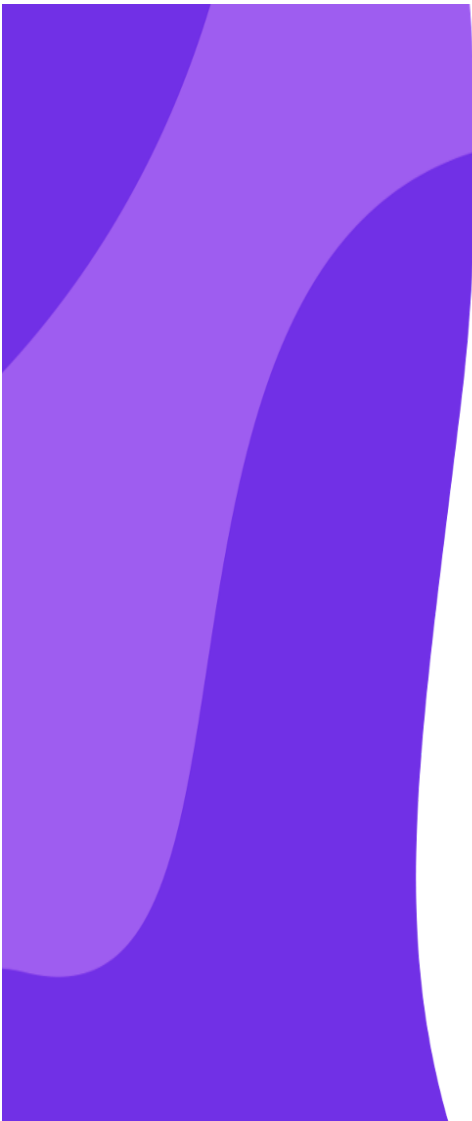
60%

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Key Facts

- Doula-assisted mothers were 4 times less likely to have a low birth weight baby and 2 times less likely to experience a birth complication and significantly more likely to initiate breastfeeding (Gruber et al., 2013).
- Studies examining the impact of women who received continuous support were more likely to have spontaneous vaginal births and less likely to have any pain medication, epidurals, negative feelings about childbirth, vacuum or forceps-assisted births, cesareans need for oxytocin, and shortened durations of labor (Kozhimannil et al., 2013).

Doula Benefits



- **Evidence based support:** Doulas serve as a bridge between mothers and their providers by helping them find their voices and advocate for the very best care. Doulas advocate for the mother’s wishes as expressed in her birth plan, in prenatal conversations, and postpartum discussion, by encouraging them to ask questions and to express any preferences and concerns (Gruber et al., 2013).
- **Emotional Support:** Doulas support the mother and family by creating a comfortable environment. They provide active listening, empathy, and laughs as parents transition into their new parenthood. Culturally-specific care doulas also provide emotional support by helping mothers navigate social determinants of health such as racism, stress, poverty, education, employment, housing, and access to other culturally specific services (Community Doula Alliance, 2021).
- **Physical Support:** Physical support during labor can help the baby find its way through the pelvis and into the birthing parent’s arms and address complications such as a mispositioned baby. Doulas provide physical support through breathing techniques, comforting touch, position ideas, and counter pressure (Dona International, 2022).

Types of Doulas

- **Labor and Birth Doula:** Support and nurture the mother during labor and birth. Offer continuous physical and emotional support such as breathwork, pushing positions, and encouragement during the birthing process
- **Postpartum Doula:** Provide support and encouragement to parents after the baby is born by helping parents adjust to the new stresses of parenthood. Also provide information on resources such as parenting groups, and referrals to specialists (Planned Parenthood, 2021)

What's Next

How to find a doula: Finding the right doula is a long process, so it is best to hire a doula by 20 weeks of pregnancy. Doulas can be found on online organizations but also through word of mouth. Receiving referrals from friends and providers is a great place to start. While interviewing doulas, things to look out for include their training and certification status, experience, availability, offered services, conversational compatibility, and fees (Dona International, 2022).

Doula Organizations:

- [Childbirth and Postpartum Professional Association \(CAPPA\)](#)
- [International Childbirth Education Association \(ICEA\)](#)
- [DONA International](#)
- [Birthing From Within](#)
- [DoulaMatch.net](#)
- [National Black Doulas Association \(NBDA\)](#)

Doula Legislation: Doula care is essential in establishing maternal health equity and lowering maternal mortality rates, yet is it currently not federally mandated to be covered by Medicaid. Over 40% of births nationwide occur under Medicaid (CDC, 2019), so having doula coverage under Medicaid could help to address the gap in maternal healthcare coverage and the rising U.S. maternal mortality rate. So far 36 states have passed legislation for postpartum care under Medicaid to be covered for a full-year after birth.

Doula fees can become expensive with many out-of-pocket costs for mothers (Safon et al., 2021). By passing legislation that increases access to doula support services, it can contribute to lower health care costs by reducing the risk of low-birth-weight babies, complications that might otherwise go unnoticed, low-risk cesarean deliveries and epidural anesthesia.

Call to Action: Maternal mortality is a national crisis, especially in women of color and rural women. Evidence-based research has found that doula support during the pre and postpartum period improves maternal health outcomes in mothers and their babies. However, many mothers are not aware of doula care, or they cannot afford it. Ways to promote and increase doula care include:



- o **Raising Awareness** Some mothers are not aware of the immense benefits of doula care. Maternity care providers must do a better job raising awareness to mothers by emphasizing the importance of hiring a doula, providing referrals, and welcoming doulas during hospital visits and labor and birth.
- o **Racial Visibility** Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native (AI/AN) women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than White women (CDC). It's important to receive doula care from doulas of color or doulas that provide culturally-sensitive care who share similar experiences as the mothers.
- o **Increasing Access** Low-income families in underserved communities under Medicaid often do not have access to the support they need during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. These are the women that require doula care most. Including doula care under Medicaid will help mothers and decrease pregnancy related complications and deaths. Doula organizations that target rural, low-income and/or women of color must be amplified to increase access for all mothers and, reduce the wide disparities in health outcomes and healthcare, especially for moms in underserved communities (Gabel et al., 2020).