

Doulas

Who They Are and Their Role in Maternal Health

Amber Bellazaire, Senior Policy Analyst | May 2023

A doula (pronounced doo-la) is a person trained to provide evidence-based information, emotional support, and physical comfort to women before, during, and just after childbirth. Doulas assist women and their partners whether they choose to give birth in a hospital, birth center, or at home.

Doulas' experience and knowledge of physiologic birth allows them to offer a variety of pain management techniques as well as information to help women make informed decisions about their medical care. Doulas help to ensure women feel supported and respected in their choices about their and their baby's health care.



Doulas **aren't** just for *home births*.

Doulas **aren't** just for *first time parents*.

Doulas **aren't** just for *unmedicated births*.

Doulas **aren't** just for *pregnant people*.

Doulas **aren't** just for *labor support*.

Doulas **support partners and spouses too**.

Doulas also **offer support before and just after childbirth**.



While midwives and physicians are tasked with overseeing the medical care of the birthing person and baby, doulas are focused on providing one-on-one continuous bedside support throughout labor and delivery. Particularly for women who choose to give birth in a hospital (which is about 98 percent of all births in the US¹) doulas are a reliable constant to rely on during labor whereas nurses and physicians commonly work in shifts and must manage several patients at a time. Moreover, unlike doulas, medical providers are responsible for documentation and monitoring equipment and technology and therefore must split their time and focus in a way a doula does not. And because doulas and the women they work with often establish a relationship during the prenatal period, women who've hired a doula can count having a familiar, affirming voice with them as they labor. In hospital settings, women are likely to have

never met the nurses, laboratory technicians, medical students, and sometimes even the doctor who may come and go as they labor and help to deliver their baby.

The support offered by doulas helps women feel encouraged and reassured through the most challenging moments of labor and early postpartum. It's no wonder then that the presence of a doula increases the likelihood of positive self-reported birth experiences and maternal and infant outcomes.^{2,3,4,5,6}

To find a doula near you, ask your healthcare provider for a referral or visit Doulas of North America at dona.org. Be sure to ask prospective doulas about their training and experience, schedule, fees, and the services they offer their clients.

Did You Know?

Since January 1, 2023, doula services have been a covered benefit for Medicaid enrollees in Michigan. The benefit includes community-based doulas, prenatal doulas, labor and birth doulas, and postpartum doulas. Doulas who work with Medicaid enrollees in Michigan must be at least 18 years old, enrolled as a Medicaid provider, and registered with the MDHHS Doula Registry. The newly established Michigan Doula Advisory Council informs the advancement of doula services in the state. For more details on the doula registry and advisory council, visit: <https://www.michigan.gov/Doula>.



¹ *Birth Settings in America: Outcomes, Quality, Access, and Choice*. 2. Maternal and Newborn Care in the United States. National Academies Press. February 6, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK555484/>

² *Prenatal-to-3 Policy Clearinghouse Evidence Review: Community-based Doulas (ER 23A.0423)*. Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. Peabody College of Education and Human Development Vanderbilt University. April 2023. https://pn3policy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ER.23A.0423_Community-BasedDoulas.pdf

³ A. Bey, A. Brill, C. Porchia-Albert, M. Gradilla, N. Strauss. *Advancing Birth Justice: Community-Based Doula Models as a Standard of Care for Ending Racial Disparities*. Ancient Song Doula Services; Village Birth International; Every Mother Counts. March 25, 2019. <https://everymothercounts.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Advancing-Birth-Justice-CBD-Models-as-Std-of-Care-3-25-19.pdf>

⁴ N. Ellmann. *Community-Based Doulas and Midwives Key to Addressing the U.S. Maternal Health Crisis*. April 14, 2020. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/community-based-doulas-midwives/>

⁵ K. Gruber, S. Cupito, C. Dobson. *Impact of doulas on healthy birth outcomes*. J Perinat Educ. 2013 Winter; 22(1):49-58. DOI: 10.1891/1058-1243.22.1.49. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3647727/>

⁶ L. Zephyrin, S. Seervai, C. Lewis, J. Katon. *Community-Based Models to Improve Maternal Health Outcomes and Promote Health Equity*. The Commonwealth Fund. March 4, 2021. <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2021/mar/community-models-improve-maternal-outcomes-equity>