

Community-Based Doulas: A Proven Solution to Improve Perinatal Outcomes

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY-BASED DOULAS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Community-based doulas are nonmedical, unlicensed, trained professionals who provide emotional, physical, and informational support to birthing people. They offer support during pregnancy through the postpartum period, from 6 weeks to 12 months. Community-based doulas differ from lay doulas and other birth doulas because they are specifically

trained for culturally sensitive care and focus on birthing people who are more likely to experience discrimination and racism in traditional healthcare settings. Additionally, community-based doulas are more likely to be people of color and often have shared experiences with their patients. Doulas support their clients by providing childbirth education, helping them navigate the health care system, advocating for them throughout the perinatal period, and connecting them with community resources.



Because community-based doulas are specifically trained for culturally sensitive care and to focus on birthing people who are more likely to experience discrimination and racism in traditional healthcare settings, the evidence also suggests that the

involvement of a community-based doula may decrease disparities in birth outcomes for mothers and infants. Further research is needed to determine whether community-based doulas can contribute to reductions in maternal mortality and morbidity.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICYMAKING

The Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University analyzes rigorous evidence to determine which policies are proven to produce positive outcomes for young children, their families, and society. A comprehensive review of new evidence reveals that community-based doulas are an effective strategy to improve child and parent health and developmental outcomes.

WHAT IMPACT DO COMMUNITY-BASED DOULAS HAVE?

Community-based doulas increase attendance at medical appointments and childbirth education classes.

Rigorous studies find that the involvement of a community-based doula led to:

- A 10 percentage point increase in attendance at four or more well-child visits within the first 6 months of life.
- A 10 percentage point increase in attending a maternal postpartum visit within 60 days of delivery.
- A 40.5 percentage point increase in childbirth education class attendance.

Community-based doulas improve child health and development.

Rigorous studies find that the involvement of a community-based doula led to:

- Increases in breastfeeding initiation rates ranging from 7.0 to 14.3 percentage points.
- A 12.3 percentage point decrease in nonbeneficial feeding practices that involve giving infants popular but nutritionally deficient food.

Community-based doulas improve birth outcomes.

Rigorous studies find that the involvement of a community-based doula led to:

- Significantly lower rates of preterm birth, low birthweight, and NICU admissions.
- An 11.4 percentage point decrease in epidural use.

Community-based doulas help foster nurturing and responsive child-parent relationships.

Rigorous studies find that the involvement of a community-based doula led to:

- Increased parental guidance and encouragement towards infants at child age 4 months.
- Increased mothers' prompt response when infants were upset at child age 4 months.
- Increased mothers' engagement with infants in stimulating activities such as reading to them, playing peekaboo, and playing with toys at child age 3 months.
- A 9.4 percentage point increase in mothers exhibiting safe infant sleep practices.

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For more information and citations for the above-referenced studies, please refer to our comprehensive Evidence Review on community-based doulas:

<https://pn3policy.org/policy-clearinghouse/community-based-doulas>.