



HB 286 - Public Health - Maternal Mortality Review Program - Stakeholders

Presented to the Honorable Shane Pendergrass and Members of Health & Government Operations Committee
February 5, 2020 2:00 p.m.

POSITION: SUPPORT

NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland urges the Health and Government Operations Committee to issue a **favorable report on House Bill 286 – Maternal Mortality Review Program - Stakeholders**, sponsored by Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins.

As an advocate for reproductive health, rights, and justice, our organization cares deeply about individuals' health and well-being during pregnancy, labor and delivery, and the post-partum period, as well as access to necessary healthcare resources, programs, and support services. Among other things, reproductive freedom means supporting the social, economic, and political conditions which allow parenting with dignity, in good health, and in safety. Unfortunately, due to structural racism and its related health inequities, many pregnant and parenting people of color are denied this basic freedom.

In the United States, Black women are [three to four times](#) more likely than non-Hispanic white women to die of pregnancy-related complications.ⁱ [Research](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that an increasing number of pregnant women in the United States have chronic health conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and chronic heart disease.ⁱⁱ These conditions, coupled with pregnancy, put intense stress on the body and can lead to higher rates of pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality. Indeed, academics and health professionals may be aware of Arline Geronimus's theory of "weathering," which is defined as the "toxic stress resulting from racism, bias and discrimination."ⁱⁱⁱ In 2020, racism is still directly and indirectly killing Black women.

While many White-passing individuals are actively working to be good allies in fighting against racism and its toxic health effects, White people do not and cannot know what it is like to operate as a Black woman—one of, if not the most, difficult identities to hold—in this country. We won't experience "weathering" and the effects it has on our pregnancies, our bodies, our lives and our families, because we cannot experience racism—the prejudice and discrimination of an individual based on the color of their skin or their ethnic background.

It is for this reason that we need people of color, particular Black women and others that can become or have been pregnant, to serve on Maryland's Maternal Mortality Review Program. Regardless of these individuals' experiences (or lack thereof) with pregnancy and/or pregnancy-related complications, Black people and people of color have greater insight into how and why so many women of color are dying due to pregnancy and childbirth, and can help us, as a state and a country, work to end this unacceptable situation. Simply put, try as

we might, those of us that are White-passing have blind-spots when it comes to racism and the effects it has on health and well-being. As a state, the very least we can do is staff the entity that explores why Black people are dying from childbirth with the same individuals who still must operate and literally try and survive in a country that was not made for them.

For these reasons, NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland **urges a favorable committee report on HB0286**. Thank you for your time and consideration.

ⁱ Callaghan, William. 2012. "Overview of Maternal Mortality in the United States." *Seminars in Perinatology* 36 (1): 2-6.

ⁱⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. "Pregnancy Mortality Surveillance System."

ⁱⁱⁱ Institute for Gender and Culture at Black Women's Blueprint. 2019. "The Sexual Abuse to Maternal Mortality Pipeline." Brooklyn.