



HB 1202

Hospitals and Birth Centers – COVID-19 Visitation Policies
Hearing of the House Health and Government Operations
Committee
March 9, 2021
1:30 PM
SUPPORT

The Reproductive Health Equity Alliance of Maryland is a cohort of community-based birth workers, policy and legal advocates, and organizations focusing on reproductive justice, pregnancy and infant health. We aim to reduce pregnancy and infant health disparities in Maryland's Black, Brown and immigrant communities by advocating for evidence-based legislative and policy solutions that expand access to quality health options designed to build healthy and stable families of color. Among our advocacy priorities is expanding access to community-based doulas for low-income families and people of color in Maryland. We **strongly support HB 1202**, which would allow doulas to enter hospitals during the pandemic to provide support to their birthing clients during labor, delivery and postpartum recovery if the doula does not presently have COVID-19 symptoms and can provide proof of a recent negative COVID-19 test.

Doulas are professional support persons who have been incorrectly categorized as visitors in Maryland. Doulas provide information, advocacy and support for individuals during pregnancy, birth and postpartum. While doulas do not offer medical advice, they do offer individualized social and emotional support to pregnant individuals, including strategies for reducing stress and other barriers to healthy pregnancy outcomes.¹ In March 2020, Maryland hospitals began closing their doors to visitors to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, those policies categorized doulas as visitors rather than professional support and doulas were banned from supporting their clients during labor, birth and postpartum in hospital settings. In present day, our members, some of whom provide care to individuals with high-risk pregnancies, are still experiencing issues in entering hospitals and are often turned away because most hospitals that allow visitation require the birthing person to choose between their partner, a support person or their doula. Many doulas in Maryland have taken to providing remote support for clients during birth and postpartum if the facility permits it, but this is not as effective as in-person intensive support. HB 1202 would eliminate major barriers to doulas being able to provide care to their clients. This bill acknowledges that doulas are not visitors, but instead are an essential part of the patient's birthing team.

Doulas help reduce maternal health disparities. Health disparities in communities of color have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Black people in Maryland were dying at a rate four times higher than their white counterparts from pregnancy complications.² We will not know the impact of the

¹ Amy Chen, *Routes to Success for Medicaid Coverage of Doula Care* (December 14, 2018) <https://9kqpw4dcaw91s37koz5jx17-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/NHealthLawP-PTBi-Issue-Brief-DoulaMedicaidCoverage.pdf>.

² Maryland Department of Health, *Annual Report Maryland Maternal Mortality Review* (2019), https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/mch/Documents/MMR/MMR_2019_AnnualReport.pdf

pandemic on maternal health disparities and birth outcomes until years from now as Maryland's Maternal Mortality Review program is several years behind in its data reporting. Our state must ensure that pregnant individuals have access to resources that are associated with positive health outcomes. Doula care in particular is associated with short labors, fewer cesareans, and higher five-minute Apgar Scores.³ HB 1202, if passed, would enable doulas to continue fostering healthy birth outcomes and would support our state's fight to eliminate maternal mortality.

We ask that this committee continue its commitment to addressing maternal health disparities by passing HB 1202, which would ensure that no birthing person must birth without the support of their doula in a hospital setting during the pandemic. For the foregoing reasons, RHEAM **SUPPORTS HB 1202** and urges a **FAVORABLE** report. Should you have any questions, please contact Ashley Black at (410) 625-9409, ext. 224 or blacka@publicjustice.org.

Sincerely,

Reproductive Health Equity Alliance of Maryland Members

Andrea Williams-Muhammad, **Co-Chair**
443-452-7283
andnic.williams@gmail.com

Ashley Black, Esq, **Co-Chair**
410-625-9409, ext. 224
blacka@publicjustice.org

Organizations

Baltimore Doula Project
Birth Supporters United
Family League of Baltimore
MOM Cares
NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland
Nzuri Malkia Birth Collective
Planned Parenthood of Maryland
Public Justice Center

Individuals

Alexis Covington
Cassidy Spence
Christine Galarza
Imani Jackson
Jazmyn Covington
Dr. Michelle Ogunwole
Teneele M. Bailey

³ Id.