

Empowering Birthing Individuals: The Role of Doulas in Maternal Health

Executive Summary

The Wisconsin Collaborative for Healthcare Quality (WCHQ), with funding from the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, conducted a Maternal Health Innovation Project to improve health equity and outcomes for birthing individuals in Wisconsin.

As part of the evaluation, WCHQ conducted interviews with patients and doulas to understand the impact of doula care during pregnancy, birth, and postpartum. These stories highlight doulas' critical role in fostering trust, confidence, and empowerment, while addressing broader community needs. The findings demonstrate that integrating doulas into healthcare systems enhances both patient experience and clinical outcomes, particularly for vulnerable and underserved populations.

Background

Maternal health disparities remain a pressing concern in Wisconsin, where access to equitable, patient-centered care can vary widely across communities. Doulas have been shown to improve outcomes and bridge gaps in the healthcare system.

This project was designed to:

- Document the lived experiences of patients supported by doulas.
- Capture insights from doulas and community health workers on their role in maternal health.
- Identify opportunities for healthcare systems to partner with doulas to advance equity and improve maternal outcomes.

Findings

Building Trust and Advocacy

“When you feel heard, you can advocate for yourself”

Pregnancy is a time of profound change, requiring trust between patients and providers. One patient described starting over with a new care team during her second pregnancy and feeling

dismissed when urgent needs went unanswered. After delivery, untreated complications left her unwilling to seek further care. Her doula recognized the distress, validated her experience, and reconnected her with a provider. This story underscores how doulas build trust and empower birthing individuals to advocate for themselves when the healthcare system falls short.

Providing Essential Emotional Support

“The doula was there for me”

Emotional support and stability are essential throughout the course of pregnancy and labor and delivery. A patient described a particularly vulnerable time during labor where the doula was the sole support of a mother expecting twins. The doula’s presence transformed what could have been an isolating and difficult experience into one of empowerment and connection. The patient felt heard and understood, allowing the patient to advocate for herself in future situations.

Strengthening Communities and Lifelong Skills

“Creating an empowered community”

Doulas empower patients by teaching skills rather than merely doing tasks. These lessons extend beyond pregnancy, fostering resilience, and self-advocacy. Many doulas also connect families to resources addressing social determinants of health, such as housing and food security. These relationships can be long-lasting, providing communities of support for important points of connection.

Transforming the Birth Experience

“My birthing experience with a doula was amazing in comparison to without”

Doulas support is meaningful even with patients who have experienced childbirth before. One patient describes the doula she worked with as being consistently present and helped her follow up with providers. The doula always called back and provided support throughout the pregnancy and after. This personalized support is especially vital in rural communities, where access to providers, pharmacies, and hospitals can be limited by distance.

Opportunities for Health System Collaboration

Doulas are proven partners in fostering confidence, trust, and empowerment for birthing individuals, offering vital support that reaches far beyond the delivery room. Health systems and obstetric providers (OBs) are a conduit for doula connection, providing the opportunities to make referrals to community-based doulas.

Health Systems across the Southern Region of Wisconsin, including Access Community Health

Centers and SSM Health collaborate directly with doulas to improve patient outcomes through coordinated care. SSM is working to expand their connection with doulas to more rural communities, increasing doula support and education for patients.

Additionally, doulas can support follow up care at home during pregnancy, such as ensuring patients have medications they need, working with patients on improving nutrition and the barriers that exist with healthy food options, and measuring at home blood pressures. These efforts not only enhance clinical outcomes but also foster trust and continuity of care.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews and findings, we recommend the following actions:

1. Integrate Doulas into Care Teams
 - a. Develop policies and workflows that formally include doulas in prenatal and obstetric care.
2. Establish Sustainable Funding Models for Doulas
 - a. Explore Medicaid reimbursement and other payment mechanisms to expand doula access for underserved populations.
3. Strengthen Community Partnerships
 - a. Build and sustain collaborations between health systems and community-based doula organizations.

Wisconsin has led the way nationally in improving health care quality. However, there are widespread disparities in health outcomes and care. The 2019 and 2020 WCHQ Wisconsin Health Disparities Reports identified health disparities by race and ethnicity, health insurance, and geography. There is an urgent need to reduce disparities that may have been magnified due to increased unemployment, loss of health insurance, lapses in education, long-term COVID-19 disability, and increased behavioral health needs.

Conclusion

Doulas are vital partners in advancing maternal health equity in Wisconsin. Their ability to build trust, empower birthing individuals, and connect families to essential resources makes them an indispensable part of the maternal care continuum. By fostering strong collaborations between healthcare systems and doula organizations, Wisconsin can take meaningful steps toward improving outcomes and ensuring that every birthing individual has access to the support they need.

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