

How to become a birth doula

A Guide for North Alabama



Introduction to doula work



A birth doula is a non-medical support person who provides guidance and support to a pregnant person in preparation for birth and throughout labor and delivery. A doula-client relationship

commonly looks like an initial meeting during pregnancy to establish a relationship, an agreement on meetings and communication before the client goes into labor, and a doula

Is a doula the same as a midwife? Nope. A doula provides non-medical emotional and physical support, while a midwife is a trained healthcare professional who delivers medical care throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Midwifery training is a lot more extensive than doula training.

This guide is focused on birth doulas, and when we use the term “doula” that’s what we mean. But doulas can be a supportive presence during any pregnancy outcome—birth, abortion or unexpected loss, and even for life transitions not related to pregnancy.



Terms ✨ **Birth doulas** provide support during pregnancy and throughout labor and delivery. ✨ **Postpartum doulas** provide support after a baby is born, usually within the first six weeks. ✨ **Abortion doulas** provide support during an abortion procedure. Community doulas assist with navigation of health care and social services, provide peer education, and give social support. ✨ **Bereavement doulas** provide support for an unexpected pregnancy loss. ✨ **Death doulas** or end of life doulas provide support for emotional, spiritual, physical, and logistical support to people who are dying. Full spectrum doulas provide support for any pregnancy outcome.

Kinds of support a doula provides



Why are doulas important?



Birthing with a doula present has proven medical benefits, including shorter labor and reduced need for medical

interventions, and increased satisfaction with the birthing experience.

But that's not the only reason doulas are important. Doulas make birth better! Birth isn't just a medical process—it's a major event in a human life. Doulas are important because they honor the experience of the whole person and their family.

Emotional Support

Doulas offer continuous emotional support to individuals and their partners. This includes reassurance, encouragement, and a calming presence throughout the entire birthing process.

Physical Support

Doulas use various comfort measures to help individuals manage the physical challenges of labor. This may involve massage, positioning suggestions, and providing guidance on relaxation techniques.

Informational Support

Doulas provide evidence-based information about childbirth, helping individuals make informed decisions about their birthing preferences. They can explain medical procedures and clarify options to empower individuals to advocate for their choices.

Advocacy

Doulas act as advocates for their clients, ensuring that the individual's preferences and birth plan are communicated to the medical team. While they do not provide medical care, they support individuals in expressing their needs and desires.

Continuous Presence

Doulas are typically present throughout labor and birth, offering a consistent and continuous source of support. This can be especially beneficial in hospital settings where medical staff may change shifts.

Postpartum Support

Some doulas also provide postpartum support, assisting with breastfeeding, newborn care, and emotional well-being during the initial days and weeks after childbirth.

A common misconception is that birth doulas only provide support for “natural birth” or birth outside of a hospital. That's not true! Doulas provide support for all kinds of births, and can help their clients navigate decisions and communicate with their doctor, nurses, or other care providers.

What kind of training or certification do I need to become a doula?



There is not one standard training or certification to become a birth doula.

Some trainings are as simple as taking some classes online, while some can take a full year to complete. Some cost as little as \$150, while others can cost thousands. When looking at different programs, elements to consider include how much the program costs, how long it takes to complete, whether there are in-person requirements or apprenticeship requirements, whether the training includes a certification, and whether the values of the

organization align with your values.

Certification is separate from training. Training equips you with knowledge. Certification means an outside organization is vouching for your credibility and skills as a doula. Certification (but not always) often comes with ongoing requirements to maintain the certification.

You might choose to train with an organization and not certify with them, or you might begin with a certification and then choose not to maintain it.

Here are some reasons doulas choose certification:

Training and Education:

Certification programs typically provide comprehensive training on childbirth, labor support, and postpartum care. This can help you feel equipped to serve your clients and navigate a variety of situations.

Access to Resources:

Certification programs often provide access to resources,

materials, and ongoing education opportunities. This can help you stay informed about the latest developments in childbirth practices and enhance your skills over time.

Networking and Community:

During the certification process you can be connected to a network of other certified doulas, healthcare professionals, and organizations. This network can be valuable for learning, collaboration, and building your doula practice.

Here are some reasons a doula might choose not to pursue certification:

Expense:

Certification can be expensive, and it's not something everyone can afford to do.

Ongoing requirements:

Some certifications require you to maintain your certification by taking continuing education, paying dues, or meeting other requirements.

Institutional bias:

Every certification program is going to emphasize different aspects of doula work, and sometimes that means they are going to reveal a certain bias about what they believe is important.

Cultural and Community Knowledge:

Attending birth is an ancient practice, and some people come to doula work with knowledge and wisdom from their community and culture. Certification isn't the only path to learning how to be a doula.

Black and brown birth workers matter!

Each person who becomes a doula has a unique perspective that informs their birth work. We can't check identities like race and culture at the door when we show up to a birth, and we wouldn't want

to. Birth work as a field tends to be dominated by white, middle-class women. Black and brown doulas are vital to a thriving doula workforce, because they have valuable insight into the cultural and lived experiences of birthing people of color

It's important for anyone becoming a doula to have some basic understanding of trauma informed care, navigating cultural differences, and recognizing

systemic/institutional racism. Some organizations that offer trainings that include these components are Birth Advocacy (badoulatraining.org), Cornerstone (cornerstonedoulatraining.com), and Doula Training International (wearedti.com/). When possible, a culturally-matched mentorship between an experienced doula and a new doula can be a helpful way to gain specific understanding about navigating challenges related to race and culture.

How do doulas make a living?



Typically, doulas work directly for the client, and not for an institution like a hospital or birth center. That means

many doulas are also running a small business, directly charging clients for their services. In some states, doulas can bill insurance for their work as a doula, but that's not the case in Alabama, yet.

Alabama needs more doulas!

Alabama has some of the worst statistics in the country for preterm labor, low birth weight, inadequate prenatal care, and maternal and infant mortality. A robust workforce of doulas is a part of changing these statistics.

How do I find clients?



An online presence like a website and social media can be a key to finding clients and giving them a way to connect with you. You can also register

with an online directory like doulamatch.net.

Word of mouth is a good way to let your community know that you're accepting clients. Creating a business card and distributing them in places like ob/gyn offices and community notice-boards can connect you to potential clients.

Some doulas set up collectives or agencies to share responsibilities like marketing, book-keeping, and managing clients; you can look for agencies in your area to see if you might want to join. Many doulas who are making a living supplement their doula work with other offerings like teaching childbirth classes, baby wearing, and lactation support.



What does a doula charge? When do I start charging?



Doula fees can vary a lot from place to place and community to community. Most doulas charge a minimum of \$500/birth, and you can begin charging for births at any time.

Keep in mind that it's difficult to attend more than 3 or 4 births a month, and that each birth you attend may include expenses like childcare, gas, or loss of other work. One of the most difficult aspects of working as a doula is the time you spend on-call for a single client. Labor can start suddenly and can last anywhere from two hours to two days.

Getting advice from other doulas in your area about what they charge can be a great place to start. You may also consider volunteering with a community doula program as you're getting started. Birthwell Partners is a community doula program in Birmingham that offers opportunities and training as well as opportunities to attend births as a volunteer.

Resources

Facebook Groups:

- **Alabama Doula Community**
- Doulas Only
- **Becoming a Doula**, moderated by Childbirth International

North Alabama Organizations:

- **Alabama Cohosh Collaborative, Madison County:** ACC is a reproductive justice organization. Our mission is to cultivate a thriving community in which people are met with kindness, generosity, empathy, and skillful care wherever they are in their reproductive health journeys and whatever choices they make for themselves.
- **ICAN, chapters in Birmingham & Huntsville:** The International Cesarean Awareness Network, a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve maternal-child health by reducing preventable cesareans through education, supporting cesarean recovery, and advocating for vaginal birth after cesarean (VBAC).
- **Birthwell Partners, Central Alabama:** Birthwell partners trains community doulas who provide caring, one-on-one support to low-resource pregnant women and teens in central Alabama.
- **Dad to Dudla, Huntsville:** Dad to Dudla is a postpartum doula and new parent educator focused on advocating, educating, empowering, and supporting from a dad's perspective.
- **Yellowhammer Fund:** Yellowhammer fund is an abortion advocacy and reproductive justice organization serving Alabama.

Online Resources:

- **Evidenced Based Birth:** publishes accurate, accessible, and inclusive research about pregnancy, labor, and childbirth
- **Doulamatch.net:** a searchable directory of doulas. This is a helpful place to connect with clients and to learn more about rates and services other doulas in your area are offering.

Glossary

Perinatal: Referring to the period around the time of childbirth, including both prenatal (before birth) and postpartum (after birth) phases.

Prenatal: Relating to the period before childbirth, encompassing the care and support provided during pregnancy.

Post-partum: The period following childbirth, often referred to as the postpartum or postnatal period, during which the body undergoes recovery and adjustment, and the newborn is cared for.

Midwife: A healthcare professional, often a certified nurse-midwife or a direct-entry midwife, trained to provide care to low-risk pregnant individuals throughout the childbirth process, including prenatal, labor and delivery, and postpartum care.

VBAC (Vaginal Birth After Cesarean): The delivery of a baby through the vaginal canal after a previous birth by cesarean section.

Natural Birth: A childbirth approach that emphasizes minimal medical interventions, focusing on non-medicated pain management and allowing the birthing process to unfold as naturally as possible.

Lactation Consultant: A specialist trained to assist individuals with breastfeeding, providing guidance on latch, positioning, and addressing common breastfeeding challenges.

Birth Center: A facility, separate from a hospital, designed to provide a homelike environment for childbirth with an emphasis on personalized, low-intervention care.

Home Birth: The choice to give birth at home with the assistance of a qualified healthcare professional, such as a midwife, in a setting familiar and comfortable to the birthing individual.

L&D (Labor and Delivery): The phase of childbirth encompassing the onset of labor through the delivery of the baby and the expulsion of the placenta.

C-Section or Cesarean: A surgical procedure in which a baby is delivered through an incision made in the birthing person's abdomen and uterus, often performed when a vaginal delivery is not feasible or safe.

Reproductive Justice: the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, to parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities. The reproductive justice framework was created by Sistersong, a national activist organization dedicated to reproductive justice for women of color.

Birth Justice: Birth justice is a component of reproductive justice. The birth justice movement works to safeguard the rights of birthing people to make decisions around their pregnancies, including seeking abortions, and to have children in safe and supportive environments.



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