



Highlighting “Bright Spots” to Address Gaps in Maternal Health

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Throughout 2023, USofCare [engaged in conversations with Black women and other women of color](#) to gather insights into the challenges they faced during their pregnancy journey, as well as what their ideal journey looked like. To complement what we heard, we identified some of the promising “bright spots”, or programs and practices that are improving maternal health outcomes and experiences, and [completed a trends analysis of these programs and practices](#).

This snapshot marries both of these pieces of research together: in the table below, we have mapped examples of innovative maternal health programs and practices¹ against the challenges we heard from the woman we spoke to. This mapping exercise allows us to see where efforts are happening across the United States that are working to improve the experiences Black women have during their pregnancy journey. By focusing on programs and practices such as these, we have insight into the types of actions that can be taken to support all women experiencing a joyful, safe, and supported pregnancy.

Gaps Identified through our Listening Research with Black Women	Bright Spots Improving Maternal Health Outcomes and Experiences
<p>Dismissive Care</p> <p>Black women often face stereotypes, assumptions, and dismissiveness from their providers, leading them to feel that their concerns and questions are unheard. Many Black women feel that their maternal health care is not personalized or whole-person focused.</p> <div data-bbox="186 1360 734 1894" style="border: 2px solid black; border-radius: 25px; padding: 15px; background-color: #f0f0f0;"> <p>“ The biggest challenges I experienced were feeling seen and heard, feeling respected. My original doctor was a white man... I know that my ethnicity played a huge role [in] how my original doctor treated me. There have been and still are non Black people who believe that we can't feel pain. Many people don't respect us on daily basis. It's frustrating, and tiresome. ”</p> <p>- Black Woman, NJ</p> </div>	<p>Racial concordance between Black patients and providers can improve trust, communication, and health outcomes. Technology is connecting Black women and other women of color to culturally sensitive and/or racially concordant care.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irth app is a "Yelp-like" app that provides prenatal, birthing, postpartum, pediatric reviews for Black and brown women. Women are able to search doctor and hospital reviews. • Health in Her HUE is a digital platform that connects Black women and women of color to culturally sensitive healthcare providers, evidence-based health content, and community support with free and paid membership options. <p>Black providers are underrepresented in health care: only 5.7% of physicians identify as Black or African American compared to 12% of the U.S. population.</p>

¹ The bright spots identified are by no means exhaustive. There are many organizations and programs that are improving maternal health, and this snapshot is only able to highlight a sample of them.

“ I felt like I had to advocate for myself more often because I know there [are] biases against Black women in regards to their pain level. A lot of doctors believe Black women have high pain tolerance levels.
- Black Woman, CA ”

Programs are increasing the diversity of the perinatal workforce and type of providers (like midwives and doulas), and can lead to [better maternal health outcomes](#) for Black women.

- The Health Resources and Services Administration’s (HRSA) [Maternity Care Nursing Workforce Expansion \(MatCare\) Program](#) awarded \$8 million in grants to universities to train and deploy more nurse midwives to diversify the maternal and perinatal health nursing workforce.
- The [Perinatal Workforce Act](#), which is part of the Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act of 2021, would establish grant programs to grow and diversify the number of maternity care providers and non-clinical perinatal health workers to support women throughout their pregnancies, labor and delivery, and the postpartum period. (Note: The Perinatal Workforce Act has not been passed.)

Limited Access To Health Care

Some Black women face barriers to accessing health care, including financial constraints, lack of health care coverage, lack of transportation, lack of child care, and more. These barriers are exacerbated in rural areas, where there are limited health care resources and providers.

“ I go to my doctor's appointment, the doctor's not there. I end up having to reschedule. It was a mess, unorganized, basically...I found out that [my doctor] was working in Charleston as well. She was [going] back and forth [between Charleston and Orangeburg]
- Black Woman, SC ”

Maternity care deserts exist where there is a lack of maternity care resources like hospitals offering obstetric care, birth centers, and obstetric providers. [March of Dimes' Maternity Care Deserts Report](#) found that 36% of U.S. counties are considered maternity care deserts, two in three maternity care deserts are in rural counties, and one in six Black babies are born in areas with limited or no access to maternity care services. Virtual care such as [telehealth visits](#) and apps can fill in the gaps.

- [Babyscripts](#) offers comprehensive virtual maternity care visits and resources for birthing people during their prenatal and postpartum journeys.
- [Poppy Seed Health](#) connects women who are pregnant, postpartum, or have experienced loss to nurses, midwives, and doulas for on-demand text support. Poppy Seed provides emotional and well-being support, as well as access to an evidence-based library of resources.

Lack Of Health Information

Black women felt they did not have enough information from their health care providers about prenatal care, pregnancy screenings, and tests, and did not know where to go to get information. Many shared that they obtained information from other sources, like the internet, family members, peers, and more.

“ I Googled everything during pregnancy. I also read audio books. I saved and consumed social media videos that helped. I sought more generalized information rather than geared towards being Black but there wasn't a lot out there anyway.
- Black Woman, CA ”

“ You just receive a bunch of pamphlets. And then what? I just think there needs to be more resources, more guidance, or like one-on-one guides for first-time mothers, I would say.
- Black Woman, GA ”

As Black women seek information outside of their health care providers, [social media](#), [online resources](#), and [support groups](#) like peer support groups and group prenatal care are becoming trusted sources to fill in the gaps and help them feel less alone in their pregnancy journey.

- [Black Mamas Glowing](#) is a virtual peer support group that provides culturally relevant health, birthing, and postpartum information for Black expectant mothers and their support persons (i.e., spouses, partners, parents, siblings, doulas, etc.) in Los Angeles county. In 2022-2023, the pregnancy peer support program was scaled up to serve a greater geographic region and collaborate with physicians, federally qualified health clinics, and community advocates.
- [My Birth Matters](#), an educational campaign and website from the California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative, educates expectant women about the overuse of cesarean delivery and encourages meaningful conversations between patients and their care team to avoid unnecessary C-sections.
- [Nurse-Family Partnership \(NFP\)](#) provides home-based pregnancy support for expectant mothers by pairing a registered nurse with a first-time mother from early in the pregnancy to the child's second birthday. NFP is based in 40 different states and has served over 385,000 families. Several studies have demonstrated [long-term benefits](#), including for [African American mothers and children](#).

Lack Of Support From The Health Care Providers During Birth

Many Black women do not feel supported by their health care providers during birth and instead seek support from family members like their husbands, partners, moms, and sisters, who serve as voices for them when they are mentally, emotionally, and physically drained.

“ I can't stop shaking because I don't know what's going on with me right now and that was also making me nervous. And just the fact that [the nurse] wasn't showing care, I think that was some of the times that I felt the most lack of care. Everybody that was probably in my labor and delivery room were all white women...and I'm trying to advocate for myself...I need you to listen to me. Because at times I was saying stuff and she was like, "Oh no, you're just feeling pressure." ”
- Black Woman, NC

“ My mom was there with me. She help[ed] to be another voice for me when I was shaking from the overdose of the epidural. I didn't get much support from staff. ”
- Black Woman, NC

During birth, Black women benefit from empowerment, agency, and support from people in the room with them. Birth centers [support pregnant women](#) by seeing them as a whole person, providing personalized care, and instilling a sense of empowerment, a strong sense of motherhood, and stronger relationships with family and friends who are present for the birth.

- The [JJ Way® model](#) is a patient-centered, team-based maternity model that emphasizes freedom of choice, self-reliance, easy access, a team approach, connection creation, gap management and education. African-American and Black women who received care the JJ Way® had [lower preterm birth rates](#).

Doulas provide crucial physical, emotional, and informational support before, during, and after childbirth, and many doulas serve as [patient advocates](#). Most women report doulas had [positive impacts on their emotional well-being](#) by providing them with someone to listen to their concerns and helping them gain confidence and belief in themselves during delivery.

- [Open Arms Perinatal Services](#) provides community-based doulas at no cost to clients. The doulas are matched based on culture, ethnicity, preferred language, and region served, and serve as intermediaries between the health care and social services systems and help to ensure services are provided in a culturally appropriate way. Participants had [better C-section rates, LBW, preterm, NICU admission, and breastfeeding outcomes](#).
- See “[Limited Access to Doulas](#)” section for more bright spots

Limited Access To Doulas And Midwives

Black women can identify the different ways a doula would have helped their pregnancy journey, from providing physical and emotional support to connecting them to resources. However, many find it challenging to access doula services because doulas are not always covered by insurance and are not affordable out-of-pocket.

“ I really wanted a Black doula but I wasn't able to afford one at the time.
- Black Woman, NJ ”

“ I tried looking for a Black doula, they're hard to find.
- Black Woman, CA ”

In addition to the physical, emotional, and information support doulas provide, doulas are associated with improved health outcomes like [reduced c-sections, premature deliveries, and length of labor](#). For Black women in particular, [culturally congruent and culturally competent doulas](#) can [provide evidence-based information](#), understand the symptoms of pregnancy complications such as preeclampsia and advocate for their pain relief. In recognition of the benefit of doula care, states, employers, health insurers, health systems, and communities are expanding doula coverage so pregnant women can access doula care.

- [Rhode Island](#) is the first state to mandate both public and private insurance to cover doula services and reimburse doulas up to \$1,500 per pregnancy, one of the highest rates set by states in the country.² An [increasing number of states](#) are also implementing Medicaid coverage for doula care.
- Employers are covering doula services either through employer-sponsored health plans or a separate employee benefit.
 - [CVS](#) covers \$1200 towards [doula care](#) after [one year of service](#) for employees who work a minimum of 30 hours a week.
 - [Walmart](#) has a [doula program](#) to cover \$1000 in fees for employees on some of their health plans in 49 out of 50 states
 - [Microsoft](#) offers \$1000 toward [doula services](#) for employees that are enrolled in its Health Connect Plan.

Insufficient Postpartum Support

Black women feel overwhelmed, lost, and lonely during the postpartum period as a result of all the new changes, and had to rely on developing their own community support from family and friends in lieu of provider support.

The continuation of care in the postpartum period is [crucial](#) to the physical and mental wellbeing of Black women. Organizations that [provide follow-up care](#) (both in person and [virtual](#)) and ongoing support and resources for new mothers after birth can prevent health complications and improve health outcomes.

² Note: Medicaid reimbursement for doula services in [many states](#) is still low compared to what doulas can make for clients paying out-of-pocket for private doula services, which can reach [\\$2,000 - \\$3,000](#). [Insufficient reimbursement impacts the number of doulas](#) who are able to serve clients with public health insurance.

Some do not have sufficient access to postpartum appointments to monitor them for possible complications, and even when they do, they often do not feel comfortable speaking up or asking questions.

“ I tried my hardest to make it seem to them like I had barely any questions and I had it under control when I was a complete mess. I was nervous and scared to speak up on how I was feeling and what I thought. . . I was just told that I needed to speak up and talk if I had any issues. But I did get 'assessed' and I was fine. I wasn't showing any signs. I didn't feel comfortable asking many questions.
- Black Woman, FL ”

“ I hadn't heard of postpartum [depression]...It was my first child, but I experienced postpartum [depression] really bad. I didn't know...I didn't know you could go ask for help...I didn't know until my second pregnancy you could go to your doctor, you can tell them this, and you can get medicine for it.
- Black Woman, SC ”

- **Healthfirst and Mount Sinai Hospital** developed a [model to reduce postpartum care disparities](#) that provides ongoing follow-up care to at-risk mothers by a community health worker, educational materials, referrals to community resources, transportation reimbursement (if necessary) for postpartum visits, and \$10 incentive to complete visit. Participants had a higher rate of postpartum visits and higher rate of postpartum outpatient/gynecologic care.
- **Mamatoto Village's Mothers Rising Home Visitation (MRHV)** program provides racially diverse mothers in the Washington, D.C. area with health education, social support, resource navigation, home visiting, food and nutrition services (including grocery deliveries), mental health counseling, lactation guidance and consultations, and postpartum support. Mamatoto Village has served [300 clients](#) yearly since 2012 and has had zero cases of maternal mortality.
- **Maven** provides critical support to close gaps in postpartum care. They provide participants [accesss to](#) mental health providers, doulas, lactation consultants, and sleep specialists to promote maternal wellbeing.
- **The Bloom Collective** is a perinatal wellness center that provides classes and 1-1 consultations from preconception through postpartum. They offer virtual postpartum support groups, postpartum doula care, and lactation consultations to support mothers.
- **Sisters in Birth** provides preventive and integrative health services and social support during prenatal, birth, and postpartum phases. Community health workers continue to provide support in the home after the baby is born including screening for birth defects and maternal complications, teaching parents how to care for an infant child, and providing breastfeeding counseling. Participants have a [significant decrease in cesarean surgery rate, a major increase in the breastfeeding rate, and a decrease in preterm births](#).

Limited Support For Mental Health Needs

Black women encountered many emotions during their pregnancy, especially during the postpartum period when they experienced a range of emotions from joy to stress to depression. Some women felt the postpartum depression screening questions were very black and white and did not capture their feelings which lay in-between, and others were nervous to speak up about the negative emotions they encountered with their health care providers for fear of repercussions.

“ If I did not have access to my own community of Black Christians and Moms, and friends to check in on me along with the social media help, my level of overwhelm post-delivery may have been insurmountable. With all the support that I had, I was on my own to deal with my mental health. ”
- Black Woman, KY

“ I just wish I had a provider that was concerned with how I was doing. I was so down and he didn't even ask. This was also in the middle of Covid which played a big part in my feelings of PPD [(postpartum depression)] ”
- Black Woman, NJ

“ I spent a lot of that pregnancy in a deep depression and even afterwards. I experienced postpartum in both of those pregnancies, so I wish that I had actually gone and got some type of therapy to help me through the pregnancy and afterwards. ”
- Black Woman, West

Black women are at [increased risk for maternal mental health conditions](#) such as postpartum depression but are often [not diagnosed or treated](#). Mental health services [are essential](#) in helping Black women adapt to postpartum life and allow them to process their birthing experience, which may have included racial trauma and medical racism. Access to [culturally responsive](#) mental health resources can make Black women feel listened to, comfortable sharing about their experiences, and find understanding with others with shared identities and experiences.

- [Oshun Family Center Maternal Wellness Village](#) provides culturally- and racially-concordant programming for Black families and offers 12 free virtual psychotherapy appointments for mothers that need psychological support. They have served more than 100 families in the last year.
- [Shades of Blue Project](#) offers a novel structured journaling support group method based on Black women's lived experience in Houston, TX and online. Participants expressed being able to manage stress levels [more effectively](#) and 100% reported decreased feelings of stigma related to seeking mental health treatment.

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