



TESTIMONY OF MELISSA PATTI
DIRECTOR OF MATERNAL AND INFANT HEALTH INITIATIVES
DELAWARE VALLEY MARCH OF DIMES
CENTER FOR RURAL PENNSYLVANIA HEARING
"Public Hearing on Women's Health"
Tuesday, October 20th, Harrisburg PA

On behalf of March of Dimes, we appreciate this opportunity to submit testimony for the record. March of Dimes has been a public health leader, supporting data, research, and innovative programming to support the health of families nationwide for over 85 years. March of Dimes remains committed to advancing data-driven solutions that address maternity care access challenges in Pennsylvania and nationwide. March of Dimes envisions a maternity care system in which trained obstetric clinicians are available, birthing facilities are accessible, and care is high-quality and affordable

State of Maternity Care in Pennsylvania

Families in Pennsylvania are continuing to face a maternal and infant health crisis. Many of our counties have premature birth rates, infant mortality rates, and maternal mortality rates that are higher than the national average. In addition, we are seeing growing racial disparities in all pregnancy and birth outcomes. Black mothers are 1.5 times more likely to have a preterm baby and 2 times as likely to suffer the loss of their infants.

This problem is exacerbated by the presence of many maternal care deserts that exist across the Commonwealth. Access to care during pregnancy and around the time of birth is not consistently available. Hospital closures and a shortage of providers are driving changes in maternity care access, especially within rural areas and among Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). The level of maternity care access within each county is classified across Pennsylvania by the availability of birthing facilities, maternity care providers, and the percent of uninsured women. Maternity care deserts are counties where there is a lack of maternity care resources, such as hospitals, birth centers, and care providers. The resulting lack of access to care presents one of the biggest barriers to safe, healthy pregnancies, and often imposes economic and emotional strains on our most vulnerable communities. Consistent, high-quality maternity care is essential to protect the health of all moms and babies. Maternity care encompasses health care services for women during pregnancy, delivery and postpartum.

Currently in Pennsylvania, we have 7 counties that are designated as maternity care deserts with no birthing facility or any obstetric care providers. For many women, lack of care options means traveling long distances and making difficult choices about where to have their babies. In our rural counties, nearly 50% of women have to travel over 30 minutes to the nearest birthing facility. Women living in maternity care deserts traveled over 3 times farther than those living in counties with full access to care. The farther a woman travels to receive maternity care, the greater the risk of maternal morbidity and adverse infant outcomes, such as stillbirth and NICU admission. Furthermore, longer travel distances

to care can cause increased prenatal stress and anxiety. The distance a woman must travel to access care becomes a critical factor during pregnancy, at the time of birth, and in the case of emergencies.

Policies and Solutions

- **Strengthening data and resources:** In Pennsylvania we are looking to build systems that will identify when counties are at risk of losing maternity wards and providers, before the care is lost. Strengthening data systems will allow the appropriate state departments to work with these counties to maintain and enhance care through targeted resources.
- **Expanding access to midwives:** Midwifery care can refer to certified nurse–midwives (CNMs), certified midwives (CMs). Midwifery care offers a chance to address health disparities and help improve birth outcomes, especially among women of color. Studies suggest that midwifery care can lower interventions (like needing a c-section or pain medicine), can lower health care costs, increase patient satisfaction (happiness), and improve overall care.
- **Sustaining and growing access to freestanding, accredited birth centers:** Birth centers are associated with improved outcomes and lower-cost, patient-centered care. Low reimbursement rates, administrative burdens, and payment delays create significant operational challenges. Expanding access to accredited birth centers is a critical strategy for addressing gaps in maternity care access, particularly in under-resourced and rural communities.
- **Mobile health care:** Mobile health programming can help to fill gaps in the continuity of care that families receive. Mobile health programs can provide care, education, and support to underserved communities with little or no access to health care and create a nontraditional environment for women and infants to receive vital health care services, otherwise unattainable.

March of Dimes thanks the Center for Rural Pennsylvania for focusing on this public health crisis. As we continue to work on advancing new policies, Pennsylvania must continue to invest in strategies to improve the health of mothers, infants, and families. With your help, we can make strides to prevent pregnancy loss, preterm birth, and end preventable maternal deaths. March of Dimes stands ready to work with you to achieve that change. We will continue working with our partners and communities to improve access for moms and babies. Continued investment and action will be critical to ensuring all women can access high-quality maternity care.

<https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/pennsylvania/report-card>

<https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/united-states/maternity-care-deserts>

<https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/blog/midwifery-care-improving-health-outcomes-moms-and-babies>