



March 3, 2023

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

*Bronx Community
Health Network*

Senate Standing Committee on Health
Senate Standing Committee on Mental Health
Van Buren Hearing Room A
Legislative Office Building
198 State St
Albany, NY 12210

*Bronx Care Health
Systems*

Re: Testimony for March 7, 2023
Public Hearing

Statement of Anastasia Libovich, The Bronx Health Link Clinical Director

*Montefiore – Albert
Einstein Medical Health
Systems*

Senator Gustavo Rivera and Senator Samra G. Brouk:

*Morris Heights Health
Center*

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in regard to best practices for integrating doula into New York's maternal healthcare system. There is a dire need to address the problems with maternal healthcare and the subsequent maternal mortality and morbidity rates in NYS. Over the past several years, The Bronx, like other parts of the country, has seen the rate of Black maternal mortality increase at a disproportionate rate, as compared to that of other communities. The Bronx's mortality rate is higher than the rates for the city and the state at large, even larger is the rate for Black women than for women of other races. This is not a new problem, yet we need new solutions to create immediate and long-term change to protect and serve all the people in our state. These solutions must incorporate ways to address multiple stakeholders: parties who have already been hurt by the system; parties who are within positions of power, to call out and rectify both our best practices, as well as our complicity or active participation in the harmful parts of the system; and to build a sustainable new culture and practice of medicine with Black and Brown communities at the forefront.

*Office of the Bronx
Borough President*

Urban Health Plan, Inc.

I stand before you today wearing many hats. I am a native New Yorker, born and raised in The Bronx; born, in fact, at one of the hospitals where many of my patients now deliver, Jacobi Hospital. I am a licensed NYS midwife, practicing over the last 10 years in nearly every setting, across the state, but mostly in my hometown of The Bronx. I am a clinician educator, working with various learners in the South Bronx, committed to elevating the awareness of medical professionals, preparing them to create the changes collectively that we so desperately need. Within my FQHC, Urban Health Plan, I also work to create curricula of study that cultivate self-aware, resilient, evidenced-based practitioners to serve the South Bronx and beyond. Before COVID19 I led our Centering Pregnancy Program, providing group-based community-building care for our patients. I am also active with the University of Rochester's School of Medicine, creating a

Mindfulness and Anti-Racist curriculum of study to bring to my peers. Before entering healthcare I was a sixth-grade public school teacher at PS 86 in the Bronx, an ABE (adult basic education) instructor working with disconnected youth through various non-profit organizations, and a teacher of ESL for recent immigrants. My transition from an educator to midwife included a pregnancy of my own, working as a WIC Peer Counselor in the Morrisania section of The Bronx, and training as a doula. I am immensely grateful to all of my students, my patients, my peers, and my mentors who collectively have supported my work in effecting positive change in The Bronx.

My newest role is that of Clinical Director of The Bronx Health Link (TBHL). Along with Shirley Leyro, our Administrative Director, and all of our staff and partners, we aim to support and uplift the amazing work happening in our borough. We strive to collectively envision better ways of doing medicine and community-building, so that the women, families, and birthing persons of The Bronx can have access to care that supports a holistically safe and healthy experience. This includes safety of body, mind, heart, and spirit. Pregnancy and birth can be an extremely vulnerable and transformative time. Let us create spaces that honor that time in a person's life, honor the effect on the family, and strengthen families and communities.

Our proposal for best practices to integrate doulas into the maternity care system is embedded in a three-pronged approach we are currently formulating. Briefly, we believe that sustainable change needs to include a restorative justice aspect to help heal the harm that has already occurred; a program by which current medical professionals, still a mostly white majority, can hold each other accountable to breaking cycles of violence that we are witness to or participants of; and supporting the work of established Black and Brown doula organizations, as well as training community members interested in pursuing doula or licensed maternity care work. Our current program, the Bronx Doula Access Project (BDAP), is part of the third facet of creating sustainable change.

In the current state of medicine, doulas fill many valuable roles, yet also increasingly find themselves needing to act as interference for their clients, providing both education and support while sometimes needing to help pregnant and birthing persons avoid problematic care. Doulas also fill the gaps of knowledge and care where our system is lacking (emotional support, breast- and chestfeeding education, mental and physical well-being education, risk-reduction information, a kind and compassionate person who can listen to concerns and worries, as well as providing hands-on care and support for the discomforts of pregnancy and labor - to name a few). Our hope, through BDAP, is to create systems that provide a doula to anyone in The Bronx who desires to have one, to educate and inform clinicians about the gaps in care that doulas and other supportive agencies can fill, and to further the conversation of improving the healthcare system with stakeholders. Conversations regarding opening communication and collaboration that ensures that our birthing persons have respectful, evidenced-based care, with clinicians who are working to eliminate racial bias in medicine.

The Bronx Doula Access Project is The Bronx Health Link's approach to filling the gap of the NYC Citywide Doula Initiative. Through BDAP, TBHL currently collaborates with The Birthing Place, Ashe Birthing Services, The Conscious Birth Collective, and the Womb Bus. Respectively, these local organizations provide childbirth education, prenatal

and birth doula services, postpartum doula services, and material incentives and products that support creating more ease for families. We have been fortunate to receive funding from State Senator Gustavo Rivera, who, as you all know, is Chair of the New York State Senate's Health Committee, as well as funding from the NYC Council, to create a model that we hope is local, sustainable, able to be scaled and studied, and that brings local doula organizations in direct contact with the patients who want them; as clinical director I am responsible for creating collaborative relationships with peers in local healthcare facilities and in the hospitals in our communities. We currently have partnered and work closely with the Midwifery Services at both BronxCare and North Central Bronx Hospital, to create a framework of collaboration so sorely needed to pave the way for the best use of doula care; with the doula as a support to the process of a healthy and safe birth; not an obstacle for providers, nor a shield for the client. We believe that having clinicians that are committed to addressing the Black maternal mortality crisis and who are able to speak directly to their peers, supports the efforts of increasing accessibility and friendliness to doulas, but also in changing the model so that the whole process is improved; in this case the care of all women, but specifically Black and Brown women, improves.

Beyond our current work with BDAP, we also propose funding to be awarded to creating capacity-building within our communities. The WIC Peer Counselor program has been transformative for participants, both as trainees and as recipients of the support and education provided by members of our own community. I hold the Morrisania WIC Peer Counselor program as an exemplary model and envision a similar capacity-building endeavor to provide free, certified, high-quality education for Bronx persons who desire to become doulas, and to find paid work supporting others in the community to change outcomes for those who find themselves creating families and birthing in The Bronx. Bronx Healthy Start has embarked on similar programming, and we propose more funding for projects that bridge the gap of accessibility as well as create a grass-roots base of trained, skilled doulas.

Much of the studies have centered around the physical health disparities, death and injury during the childbearing year, disproportionately affecting Black women. We would be remiss to not also include substantial increases to supporting the mental health and well-being of our communities, specifically of Black women and their families. Mental health is an issue across the entire United States (particularly after COVID), and not surprisingly, especially serious in The Bronx, where consistently, for too many decades, residents experience the worst outcomes across the health spectrum, including mental health. As we continue to provide maternal and infant care to our Bronx community, it is also important to recognize that mental illness ranks as the *second-most common cause of death* among those who have recently given birth. Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs) are very common among birthing persons, and we want to address this distressing statistic by expanding our programs to include workshops and groups that both educate our community about PMADs, but also properly and efficiently refer persons living with PMADs to the appropriate professional services.

In closing, TBHL will continue to champion any initiatives which challenge our maternal health system to do better for all patients, but especially for the Black and

Brown persons entering care. On a personal note, I have myself witnessed, and heard from patients and peers, both extremely supportive and transformative experiences in maternity care, as well as those that were harmful. None of us are unaware of the women who have already lost their lives in this crisis. TBHL is committed to developing and supporting communities of medical professionals who want to do better, communities of Black and Brown doulas who want to serve, and most importantly the people and families of The Bronx.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on The Bronx Health Link's views about this most important topic. The time to act to address the Black maternal mortality crisis was yesterday, and we must have a creative, collaborative, collective response to address it. Protecting the lives of all of our birthing persons is everyone's business, and I believe that everyone present today is ready, willing, and able to act.