



# POSITION STATEMENT

## **Midwifery Certification in the United States**

This document provides a brief overview of the midwifery profession in the United States, and clarifies the position of the American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) with regard to midwifery credentials and appropriate qualification for midwifery practice. ACNM looks forward to the day when there is one unified profession of midwifery, with unified standards for education and credentialing, working toward common goals. In the meantime, we continue to maintain our standards for academic preparation and clinical practice.

### **ACNM supports the following definition of a professional midwife:**

“A professional midwife in the United States is a person who has graduated from a formal education program in midwifery that is accredited by an agency recognized by the US Department of Education. The professional midwife has evidence of meeting established midwifery competencies that accord with a defined scope of practice corresponding to the components and extent of coursework and supervised clinical education completed. In addition, this person has successfully completed a national certification examination in midwifery and is legally authorized to practice midwifery or nurse-midwifery in one of the 50 states, District of Columbia, or US jurisdictions.”

### **ACNM supports laws and regulations that include:**

1. Successful completion of a formal education program accredited by an agency recognized by the US Department of Education.
2. Successful completion of a national certification examination in midwifery.
3. Successful completion of regular recertification/continuing education.
4. A scope of autonomous practice, recognized by law or regulation, that is consistent with the content of the education process and certification exam.
5. Governance of health care that supports seamless access to and collaboration with qualified health care professionals and institutions within the health care system.

### **Background**

Midwifery is an ancient profession, with a proud tradition of providing care for women during pregnancy and childbirth. Physician-attended birth is a relatively new concept in the United States. Midwives attended the vast majority of births until the 1930s when the place of birth moved from the home into the hospital. During the 1920s, as public health nurses were utilized to provide care in poor urban and rural areas, a combination of the nursing and midwifery professions, modeled after nurse-midwives in the United Kingdom, led to the formation of the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky, followed by the Maternity Center Association in New York. American nurse-midwives trace their history to rural and urban settings where mothers and their babies frequently had little access to health care. From the beginning, nurse-midwives were able to provide essential primary care to women and their families in a variety of settings. These early experiences provided the first documented evidence in the US that nurse-midwives could reduce the rates of maternal and infant mortality and improve

the health of women, especially among underserved populations. In the 1970's, the popularity and acceptance of nurse-midwives within the mainstream medical practice increased dramatically. At that same time there was a resurgence of birth attendants providing homebirths in response to women's dissatisfaction with the nature of hospital births at that time.

Over the past 80 years, certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and, more recently, certified midwives (CMs) in America have continued the tradition of providing comprehensive care to women. CNMs and CMs practice in collaboration and consultation with other health care professionals, providing primary, gynecological and maternity care to women in the context of the larger health care system. In 2005, CNMs attended more than 10% of all vaginal births in the US. ACNM is the national organization representing the interests of the more than 11,000 CNMs and CMs in all 50 states and most US territories. ACNM is proud of our twin heritages of nursing and midwifery. However, we do recognize that this dual preparation is *not* a basic requirement to provide competent midwifery care to women and their families.

### **The Accreditation and Credentialing Process for CNMs and CMs**

Nurse-midwifery and certified midwifery education programs in the US are currently accredited by an autonomous agency recognized by the US Department of Education, the Accreditation Commission for Midwifery Education (ACME) (formerly the ACNM Division of Accreditation). Until 1997, the ACNM Division of Accreditation (ACNM DOA), recognized by the US Department of Education, only accredited educational programs for nurse-midwives. Only graduates from those programs were eligible to sit for the national certification exam offered by the ACNM Certification Council (ACC). Because ACNM believes that a nursing credential is not the only avenue of preparation for midwives to deliver safe and competent care, we moved to accredit education programs for midwives who do not wish to earn a nursing credential. The American Midwifery Certification Board, Inc. [AMCB, formerly the ACNM Certification Council, Inc. (ACC)] opened its national certification exam to non-nurse graduates of midwifery education programs and issued the first certified midwife (CM) credential in 1997.

Certified midwives are educated to meet the same high standards that certified nurse-midwives must meet. These are the standards that every state in the U.S. has recognized as the legal basis for nurse-midwifery practice. All education programs for CMs, like CNMs, are at the post-baccalaureate level. Beginning in 2010, a graduate degree will be required for entry into clinical practice for both CMs and CNMs. CMs take the same AMCB certification exam as CNMs and study side-by-side with nurse-midwifery students in some education programs. As an organization, ACNM supports efforts to legally recognize CMs as qualified midwifery practitioners granted the same rights and responsibilities as CNMs.

### **Global Standards for Professional Midwives**

The International Confederation of Midwives (ICM) has defined a midwife as a person who, "having been regularly admitted to a midwifery education program duly recognized in the country in which it is located, has successfully completed the prescribed course of studies in midwifery and acquired the requisite qualifications to be registered and/or legally licensed to practice midwifery." Studies have documented the quality of care provided by midwives who meet the ICM standard in both industrialized and developing countries. ACNM's definition of midwifery in the United States is congruent with the international definition.

## **The Legal Status of Midwifery**

Nurse-midwives practice legally in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Certified Midwives practice legally in New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island. There are midwives practicing in the United States who meet neither the ICM definition nor the ACNM definition. The legal status of these midwives in the US varies by state.

## **Standards of Practice**

The ACNM *Standards for the Practice of Midwifery* require that the CNM/CM: demonstrate a safe mechanism for obtaining medical consultation, collaboration and referral; participate in a program of quality assurance and peer review; practice in accordance with the legal and disciplinary requirements of the jurisdiction where the practice occurs; and show evidence of continuing educational competency. It is the goal of ACNM to make certain that all women have the assurance that practitioners calling themselves midwives meet standards of academic and clinical preparation consistent with the International Confederation of Midwives definition, and incorporate appropriate standards of practice in order to ensure safe, competent care for women.

## **Out-of-Hospital Birth**

ACNM respects the desire of women for a natural, normal birth in the setting of their choice and is committed to eliminating barriers to safe out-of-hospital birth, such as the difficulty in obtaining affordable professional liability insurance and physician consultation. ACNM supports education and practice by CNMs and CMs in *all* settings, which includes hospitals, birth centers, and at home. Studies on birth center and home births attended by midwives have confirmed the safety of **planned** out-of-hospital birth for healthy women experiencing **normal** pregnancy and birth with midwives who have seamless access to and collaboration with qualified health care professionals and institutions within the health care system.

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