

POSITION STATEMENT

Birth Doulas

Doulas are trained to provide physical, emotional, and informational support to a laboring person and their support people. Their work on the maternity care team is known to improve birth outcomes and increase satisfaction with the birth experience.¹ Birth doulas are an integral part of the maternity care team, promoting physiologic birth,² attending to the nonclinical needs of the laboring person, and enhancing communication and relationships among the client and their midwife, physician, and nurse.

The continuous labor support provided by birth doulas is consistent with the hallmarks of midwifery: incorporation of scientific evidence into clinical practice; promotion of patient- and family-centered care; recognition of the therapeutic value of human presence; collaboration with members of the interprofessional health care team; and advocacy for informed choice, shared decision-making, and the right to self-determination.³ Federal, state, local, and institutional policies that promote continuous labor support will yield optimal birth outcomes for mothers and babies and result in substantial cost savings overall.^{4,5}

The American College of Nurse-Midwives (ACNM) affirms the following:

- The skill, training, and expertise provided by doulas make them a valuable part of the health care team, working collaboratively to facilitate a safe, satisfying, and client-centered labor and birth experience.
- Decades of research clearly demonstrate that continuous labor support contributes to improved outcomes, such as lower cesarean rates, lower rates of epidural anesthesia use, and higher rates of breastfeeding initiation, without risk of harm.^{2,6}
- Given that states now recognize investments in doula care as an integral part of maternity care reform, ensuring adequate remuneration and investment in all evidence-based maternity care will advance sustainable efforts to improve maternal and infant health outcomes.⁷
- By providing culturally congruent, client-centered care and advocacy, community-based doulas may give support that will help protect parents from the effects of racism and racial bias in health care settings.⁸

Background on the Benefits of Continuous Labor Support

Physical, emotional, and informational support is essential to ensuring the best perinatal outcomes. The physical support provided by a birth doula can include guiding position changes during labor, ensuring adequate energy and hydration for the client, and relieving the client's discomfort and pain by offering comfort measures. Physical support can also include massage and help with ambulating or getting in and out of the bathroom or tub. This type of support not only increases a laboring person's sense of well-being, confidence, and comfort, but it also may shorten the duration of labor.⁹ Emotional support is essential because labor and birth are intense

life experiences, often occurring in an unfamiliar health care setting. The relationship among a doula and the birthing person, their support persons, and the provider can enhance the birthing person's confidence and trust in themselves and the birth process and increase pride and satisfaction in labor and birth. Making positive memories of the birth experience can create a strong foundation for the future challenges of parenting. Informational support expands and explains what the other perinatal care providers may be offering, provides reassurance about the normal course of labor and birth, and allows access to evidence-based information about options in labor and birth for the laboring person and their support person.¹⁰ Trained birth doulas can assist maternity care providers in explaining health care jargon, terminology, and routine processes to the people they serve in culturally congruent ways. Informed and shared decision-making is enhanced when a doula is part of the maternity care team.

In addition to their work during birth, doulas provide support to birthing people before and after birth. Prenatally, doulas meet one on one to aid with readiness for labor as well as provide education about how to cope. Postnatally, doulas often support the family by cooking, cleaning, and caring for other children. This allows the parent(s) to focus on bonding with and feeding the baby. Many doulas are also certified breastfeeding counselors and can work to improve the breastfeeding/chestfeeding experience.

ACNM supports the collaborative role doulas play in the care of pregnant and birthing people and recognizes the importance of their skill set as a positive addition to the health care team.

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Note. The terms *midwifery* and *midwives* as used throughout this document refer to the education and practice of certified nurse-midwives (CNMs) and certified midwives (CMs) who have been certified by the American Midwifery Certification Board (AMCB).

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