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Ways and Means Committee



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THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

March 9, 2021

House Bill 1202 Hospitals & Birthing Centers – COVID-19 Visitation Policies

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to present **House Bill 1202 Hospitals & Birthing Centers - COVID-19 Visitation Policies – Doulas**, which would require a doula to be authorized to be present with a birthing person during labor delivery, etc. and prohibit a doula from being considered a support person or visitor in hospitals during any public health emergency.

Despite decades of medical advancements, pregnant people experience unacceptably poor maternal health outcomes in our country. According to a 2020 report by the Maryland Department of Health, Black maternal deaths in our state remain consistent with the national mortality average. In Maryland, Black women are four times as likely to die from pregnancy complications than their white counterparts.

Extensive, reliable research shows that doula care is a highly valued model that improves childbirth outcomes, especially for Black families. Doula support during pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period reduce rates of cesarean deliveries, prematurity, and illness in newborns and the likelihood of postpartum depression. Doula care also improves overall satisfaction with childbirth care experience and fosters health practices such as breastfeeding. Yet, despite the numerous, well-documented benefits of doula care, in-person doula services are not being utilized in many hospitals due to restricted COVID-19 visitation policies.

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, well-intentioned hospitals updated visitor policies in an attempt to limit person-to-person contact and stop the spread of coronavirus. In maternity wards, expecting mothers were in most cases allowed a single visitor during childbirth, forcing patients going into labor to choose between family and hired supporters like doulas. While we know the exclusion of doulas was not implemented to cause harm to pregnant people, HB1202 calls for protocols that would allow doulas to safely attend births coupled to the one support person chosen by the laboring person.

In addition to mandating that doulas are authorized in Maryland hospitals, HB1202 provides guidelines to ensure the safety of patients, doulas, and hospital staff. As amended, the bill requires all doulas to provide evidence of a negative COVID-19 test result from an administered test within seven days. The bill also allows hospitals to reject a doulas' entry if the trained professional shows COVID-19 symptoms.

As you will hear today, for the thousands of expectant parents for whom navigating hospitals is scary and confusing, for persons with doctors who have a more medicalized approach to childbirth than they'd like, and for women of color whose maternal mortality rate is grotesque and tragic, doulas — who aid people

in advocating for themselves — can be lifesaving. For these reasons, I urge the committee to give a favorable report for **House Bill 1202**.

Sincerely,

Delegate Jheanelle Wilkins,