

Testimony for HB1202

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Submitted by Carling Sothoron of Baltimore Doula Project

Baltimore Doula Project is in support of HB1202, permitting birth doulas to accompany their laboring and/or postpartum clients in all Maryland hospitals and birth centers. Baltimore Doula Project is a not-for-profit program that offers doula services on a sliding scale fee structure based on income to Baltimore City and County residents. Most of the clients we work with have lower than average incomes and are Black. The majority of our clientele are at risk of adverse birth outcomes and labor experiences based on their race, income level, medical history, and use of drugs. This is often why they are seeking doula support. Due to the visitor policy restrictions at local hospitals and birth centers over the past year, our doulas have not been able to be in-person with their clients once at the hospital. There have been a couple of exceptions where a client chose their doula over a partner or family member, which meant they were alone during the 3-5 day postpartum stay in the hospital after birth. For the past year we have been providing virtual doula support to clients through phone and video communication during labor, birth, and early postpartum. It has proved challenging, significantly less effective, and disappointing among other things. Clients have reported feeling disrespected, not listened to, unaware of all of their options, pressured into certain decisions because they didn't have the support they needed, and most of all wishing their doula could have been there in-person. These are all the situations that our clients were trying to avoid by hiring a birth doula. As doulas, it has required a lot of adjusting and extra work to meet our clients' needs virtually. The nature of doula work is very hands on, intimate, and best done in-person. It requires relationship building, trust, and communication. It is very difficult to get the full benefit and connection from a doula over the phone or by video. COVID has created excess stress, anxiety, and depression for many, and especially pregnant people. Having a doula present feels more important than ever to help birthing people feel grounded, in control, and supported. The Baltimore Doula Project doulas are eager and ready to be welcomed back into all hospitals and birth centers with our clients. Our professional skills are an asset to the birthing team and all birthing people who have hired doulas deserve to have their doulas with them continuously throughout labor, birth and early postpartum.