

WHAT IS A DOULA?

The word “doula” was coined in the 1960s and comes from the Greek word meaning “women who serve.” However, the role that doulas play—to provide company and support during pregnancy and birth—is one that has existed throughout American history, and in other cultures and traditions, for much longer.

Contemporary doulas are non-medical professionals who provide emotional, physical, and informational support and guidance in different aspects of reproductive health. Doulas can support someone through menstruation, fertility, pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, labor and delivery, stillbirth, breastfeeding, postpartum care, and end of life care. Most doulas focus on prenatal care, labor and delivery, and postpartum care. Doulas do not provide medical care, and do not replace medical providers such as physicians, midwives, and nurses. Rather, doulas provide additional support in places and times where medical providers cannot or do not, during the prenatal period, labor and delivery, and postpartum period.

Community-based doulas typically come from the same community as the pregnant and postpartum people that they serve. This ensures cultural congruency, greater access to linguistic needs, and an understanding of the particular challenges faced by Black, Native American/Indigenous, and other communities experiencing the highest burden of birth disparities. Doulas can help reduce the impacts of racism and racial bias in health care settings by providing individually-tailored and client-centered care and advocacy.

While doulas are not the solution to addressing maternal and infant mortality and morbidity, they offer a critical intervention that can provide much needed support during a crucial part of women’s lives.

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Advancing Birth Justice: Community-Based Doula Models as a Standard of Care for Ending Racial Disparities, a report by Ancient Song Doula Services, Village Birth International, and Every Mother Counts, offers one of the best and most comprehensive definitions of a doula that we have seen. We quote from it here:

“Doulas are trained to provide non-clinical emotional, physical and informational support for people before, during, and after labor and birth. . . . Doulas can be particularly beneficial for women of color and women from low-income and underserved communities and can help reduce health disparities by ensuring that pregnant people who face the greatest risks have the added support they need.”



This is fact sheet #1 in a series of three fact sheets about Medi-Cal coverage for doula care. Read our full report at <https://healthlaw.org/resource/doulareport>.