

LeAnne Dunham
Columbia, Maine
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Senator Ingwersen, Representative Meyer, and Honorable Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

Thank you for your time today. My name is LeAnne Dunham. I am a resident of Columbia and I am speaking today in support of LD 1523, "An Act to Improve Perinatal Care Through Expanded Access to Doula Services." I am a doula, childbirth educator, and mom of four.

I have been a doula for nearly nine years, and in that time have seen the immense impact doulas have for birthing families.

The role of a doula is a unique position on the birth team. We form strong, supportive relationships with birthing people and their families. We are a constant presence at their birth; providing support based on the relationships we forged during their pregnancy. A tenant of being a doula, and the evidence that supports how effective this role is, is that we provide continuous, one-on-one support. That means our shift doesn't change. We don't leave to support other families. We are with our clients for their entire birth process. This continuous support is shown to decrease pain and anxiety during labor, shorten labors, a higher satisfaction with birth experience, decrease cesarean section rates, and better infant outcomes (Bohren, M.A., Hofmeyr, G., Sakala, C., et al., 2017). In other words, doula support is a safe and beneficial way to increase the likelihood of better outcomes for the birthing person and the baby.

The role of doula goes beyond just birth. Our role in the postpartum time is equally important. I stay on-call and in contact with families after their baby arrives. This support, both informationally and emotionally, is essential in this time. From feeding challenges to adjusting to life with a newborn, wrestling with sleep deprivation to recovery from birth, I provide nurturing support, resources, and referrals in their home. And once again, the relationship we form with families allows them this support during such a vulnerable and tender time that is having a newborn.

As rural hospitals close their birthing units and families are driving far away from their communities to have babies, doulas have been and will be, a conduit for families to get resources and support in their home area. In my role, I have connected families to many resources including lactation specialists, pediatricians, obstetricians and midwives, chiropractors, acupuncturists, community support groups, organizations such as Maine Families and WIC, public health nurses, mental health counselors, placenta encapsulators, pelvic floor physical therapists, and the list goes on.

In my beautiful, rural corner of the state, where 27.8% of people use Mainecare(Pendharkar, 2025), access to high-quality perinatal care is a constant conversation and worry among birthing families in Washington County.

A major step toward solutions for the perinatal and rural healthcare crisis we are facing is to first recognize that birth is not strictly a medical experience. Honoring and supporting the physical and emotional journey of a family is essential. The relationships doulas make with birthing families allows greater access to needed resources and healthcare. That is support everyone deserves, and in a county like mine, this bill will make a huge impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective. I am happy to answer questions or provide more information and I urge you to vote "ought to pass" on LD 1523. Thank you.

References:

Bohren, M.A., Hofmeyr, G., Sakala, C., et al. (2017). "Continuous support for women during childbirth." Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2017, Issue 7.
Art. No.: CD003766.

Pendharkar, Eesha. "Maine Is Particularly Vulnerable to Federal Medicaid Cuts due to Rural, Aging Population." Maine Morning Star, 17 Jan. 2025,
mainemorningstar.com/2025/01/17/maine-is-particularly-vulnerable-to-federal-medicaid-cuts-due-to-rural-aging-population/. Accessed 13 Apr. 2025.