



OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

T (202) 659-1800
E advocacy@marchofdimes.org
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January 5, 2022

The Honorable Ben Ray Luján
U.S. Senate
498 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Katherine Clark
U.S. House of Representatives
2448 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jaime Herrera Beutler
U.S. House of Representatives
2352 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
U.S. House of Representatives
2083 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ashley Hinson
U.S. House of Representatives
1429 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Luján and Representatives Clark, Herrera Beutler, Roybal-Allard, and Hinson:

I am writing today on behalf of March of Dimes, the nation's leading nonprofit organization fighting for the health of all moms and babies, in strong support of the Birth Access Benefitting Improved Essential Facility Services (BABIES) Act that you introduced earlier this year.

We began that fight more than 80 years ago as an organization dedicated to eradicating polio in the U.S., a goal that we achieved. We continue that fight today as we work to address some of the biggest threats to moms and babies, such as premature birth and maternal mortality, through research, education, programs and advocacy.

March of Dimes' ongoing work to improve maternal and infant health is more important than ever as our nation is in the midst of a dire maternal and infant health crisis. Rates of preterm birth are increasing, the U.S. is one of the most dangerous places to give birth in the developed world, and there are unacceptable disparities in birth outcomes between women and infants of color and their White peers. We also know, the health and well-being of mothers and infants are inextricably linked. By improving the health of, and conditions for, women before, during and between pregnancies, we can improve outcomes for both them and their infants. But we have many challenges before us.

The BABIES Act will take an important step in improving access to maternity care by requiring the Centers of Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS) to establish a Medicaid demonstration program to improve freestanding birth center services for women with low- risk pregnancies

Babies born to mothers who receive insufficient prenatal care are at a higher risk for preterm birth, low birthweight, infections, and chronic health problems later in life. Birth centers have been shown



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to lower rates of preterm birth and low birthweight; lower rates of cesareans and result in a cost savings of \$2,000 per mother-infant pair. Your legislation would build upon that success by expanding access to freestanding birth centers for Medicaid recipients. This is especially important in a time when many rural and urban hospitals have closed their obstetric units due to high costs, leaving many vulnerable populations without access to the maternity care they need.

According to our 2020 report, *Nowhere to Go: Maternity Care Deserts Across the U.S.*, 7 million women of childbearing age live in counties without access or with limited access to maternity care and give birth to more than 500,000 babies per year.¹ Of those, 2.2 million live in maternity care deserts (1,095 counties) that have no hospital offering obstetric care, no birth center and no obstetric provider. Maternity care deserts have a higher poverty rate and lower median household income than counties with access to maternity care. Since 2010 there has been an increase in the percentage of rural obstetric units that have closed their doors and currently only 8 percent of obstetric providers report practicing in rural areas. While the focus of maternity care deserts is often in rural areas, this problem also occurs in urban areas and areas adjacent to urban centers. 1 in 3 live women of childbearing age in a maternity care desert reside in a large metropolitan area or urban setting.

As maternal health and infant health outcomes continue to decline in the United States, we are pleased to support creative and cost-effective policy solutions like the BABIES Act. March of Dimes appreciates and applauds all your efforts to address quality, affordable maternity and infant care in the United States. We look forward to working with you to advance this important legislation.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

Stacey Brayboy

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Stacey Brayboy

Senior Vice President, Public Policy & Government Affairs

¹ <https://www.marchofdimes.org/materials/2020-Maternity-Care-Report.pdf>