HEALTHY MOMS. STRONG BABIES.
MARCH OF DIMES

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June 24, 2026

The Honorable Bill Cassidy
Chairman
Senate HELP Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Ranking Member
Senate HELP Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Cassidy and Ranking Member Sanders:

March of Dimes, the nation's leading nonprofit organization fighting for the health for all moms and babies, writes to urge you to include the NIH IMPROVE Act (S. 3254) and Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act (S. 380) in the Senate HELP Committee's legislative session next month. We appreciate the Committee's previous work to advance policies critical to addressing the maternal health crisis, including the Preventing Maternal Deaths Reauthorization Act enacted earlier this year, and the Healthy Start Reauthorization Act approved in your markup earlier this month.

The U.S. is among the most dangerous developed nations for childbirth, especially for those who are Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, live in maternity care deserts, or are insured by Medicaid. Our "Nowhere to Go: Maternity Care Deserts Across the U.S." (2024 report) showed that more than 2.3 million women of reproductive age live in a maternity care desert.[1] We also know that more than one-third of U.S. counties are considered maternity care deserts, which is associated with a 36% greater risk of maternal mortality compared to living in counties with full access to these services. Rural communities are much more likely to have inadequate access to maternity care compared to urban communities, with approximately two-thirds lacking a birthing facility or obstetrician.

NIH's IMPROVE Initiative is a research effort that supports work to reduce preventable maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity, improve health before, during, and after pregnancy, and reduce longstanding disparities in maternal outcomes. The bipartisan NIH IMPROVE Act would help ensure this work continues and expands. Stable support through this legislation would strengthen research into the causes of maternal death and serious complications, including cardiovascular and hypertensive conditions, hemorrhage, infection, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders, and accelerate the development of evidence-based interventions, and improve the ability of NIH and its partners to translate findings into better care for mothers and infants nationwide.

In addition to advancing critical research, it is equally important that the Committee work to advance measures that will help address the lack of access to care like the Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act. This bipartisan legislation aims to improve maternal health in rural areas by funding emergency training, equipping non-obstetric facilities, and expanding telehealth. Key provisions include federal grants for equipment, specialized training for rural staff, and pilot programs for urgent teleconsultation, with a focus on areas lacking dedicated obstetric units. This legislation contains a set of policies to improve obstetrical readiness that does not duplicate existing programs and would provide necessary resources to communities facing significant barriers to

[1] Stoneburner A, Lucas R, Fontenot J, Brigance C, Jones E, DeMaria AL. Nowhere to Go: Maternity Care Deserts Across the US. (Report No 4). March of Dimes. 2024. https://www.marchofdimes.org/maternity-care-deserts-report

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needed healthcare with declining access to obstetric services. While it is not a solution to the systemic loss of labor and delivery units and hospital closures that are putting facilities for high-risk pregnancies out of reach for families, it would help communities that have experienced closures where the average time to maternity care in maternity care deserts is 38.0 minutes, over 2 times the average travel time (14.4 minutes) for birthing people living in full access counties.

The House Energy & Commerce Committee recently voted unanimously to advance the NIH IMPROVE Act. The Senate HELP Committee has a limited window of opportunity this session to advance maternal health legislation. It is imperative that both chambers vote to authorize this important maternal health research program into law. We ask that you also advance the Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act to address the growing trend of maternity care deserts caused by labor and delivery unit closures that are further limiting access to maternity care for families in rural communities.

We urge the Committee to include both these critical pieces of legislation in your upcoming July markup. The passage of the NIH IMPROVE Act and Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act would be a meaningful step toward reducing preventable maternal death and pregnancy complications and building a healthy future for mothers and babies across the country. For more information, please contact KJ Hertz (khertz@marchofdimes.org).

Sincerely,

Stacey Y. Brayboy
Sr. Vice President, Public Policy & Government Affairs

CC:
All Members of the Senate HELP Committee
Sponsor/Cosponsors of NIH IMPROVE Act
The Honorable Katie Britt
The Honorable Cory Booker
The Honorable Raphael Warnock
The Honorable Jon Ossoff

Sponsor/Cosponsors of Rural Obstetrics Readiness Act
The Honorable Maggie Hassan
The Honorable Susan Collins
The Honorable Katie Britt
The Honorable Tina Smith
The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito
The Honorable Maria Cantwell
The Honorable Chris Coons
The Honorable Jim Justice