

## Babies

continued from page 1

A research brief by the Urban League of Portland points to race-related stress as one crucial factor, along with poor housing, economic uncertainty, unsafe neighborhoods and lack of education. It recommends a community-led, hospital-sponsored doula program to combat the problem.

"The lifelong stress of dealing with racism can have a physical impact," says Midge Purcell of the Urban League of Portland. "Even African American women who are so-called middle-class, have higher education degrees and relatively well paid jobs, still tend to have lower birth-weight

Even Black women who are middle-class ... tend to have lower birth-weight babies

babies.

"We felt it was very important to advocate for policy that made a difference for mothers and babies. And in reproductive health as well as in other areas of healthcare, the issue of culturally specific services kept rising to the top as we searched for an effective intervention."

### Research Supports Use of Doulas

The Oregon Coalition to Improve Birth Outcomes, which includes Multnomah County Healthy Birth Initiative, Regence Blue Cross Blue Shield and ICTC, sees doulas as a first-line resource for preventing infant deaths, especially in communities of color, but also in rural areas where women

may have to travel miles to see a doctor.

"The research shows that to the extent that the healthcare workforce is trained in culturally competent service delivery then the outcomes are better for communities of color," Purcell says. She notes that the Latino community has used community health workers very successfully, as 'promotoras', or health promoters.

National research has shown that using doulas or similar community health workers, reduces the use of medical interventions such as caesarian deliveries (50 percent reduction), speeds birth, and lowers depression rates in new mothers.

The 'Listening to Mothers Report,' a national study created by Boston University School of Public Health for the nonprofit Childbirth Connection, reported that, "Doulas and midwives were the most highly rated providers of labor support, yet were used for this purpose far less frequently than other types of providers."

"In the United States we are not as baby-friendly as we say we are," Monroe says. "Most of our mothers feel afraid, and undervalued. They don't go to childbirth classes. But our doulas do empowerment childbirth classes. They make sure mothers have resources and they support women through the pregnancy right through to helping with breastfeeding and after the birth."

### Trained, Certified and Out of Work

Monroe points out that doulas trained through ICTC must pass tests, meet benchmarks and certification requirements, and attend continuing education classes. Their services are in demand. In fact, local hospitals often refer women to ICTC's Full Circle doula services. But because the profession

## Seattle Garden



Bishop Tyson establishing the Garden at Goodwill Missionary Baptist Church, Seattle.

is not a recognized part of the medical care system, health insurance doesn't cover their services.

The low-income and minority women who really need doulas don't have money to pay for them, Monroe says. And while doulas often do volunteer, because they know their communities need them, they can't afford to work for free.

"I see doulas leaving the profession to take other kinds of jobs because they need to be paid," she said. "We're losing experienced doulas because they just can't attend a birth and work 18 hours, two or three times a month with no pay."

Monroe is pleased that the door has now

been opened for doulas to be recognized and funded, but she said that to be successful the effort will need backing from a wide range of community members.

The doula bill was just one of several healthcare bills backed by the Urban League that tackled this crucial issue of cultural competence. A coalition of minority advocates had hoped to make cultural competence training a requirement for licensing in the medical professions. Purcell said advocates are disappointed that their efforts failed this time around. Still, they will continue to push for improved training for medical professionals, and also for the state to recognize community health workers as a

necessary and integral part of the healthcare delivery system.

"We have seen through testimony, time and time again, that the specific needs of communities are often not understood and that they are overlooked," Purcell said. "There's a place for community health workers to take on part of that health promotion and prevention. They are trusted and that's really important."

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