“Today, they have transformed into Health Connect One, a training organization for communities nationwide interested in starting their own community based doula programs. The need is everywhere, and these women are working hard to make these important services available everywhere for all moms.”

– U.S. Senator Richard J. Durbin

Mr. DURBIN. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act offers community health workers some overdue recognition, and more importantly, authorizes grants to help support and expand their work.

Community health workers are from the communities they serve. From rural small towns to the urban inner city, community health workers reach out to underserved communities in ways that the current health care system cannot, providing culturally and linguistically appropriate health information in a more familiar and welcoming manner. Their work helps to bridge the healthcare gap and diminish disparities.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the community-based doula program. Community-based doulas support pregnant women during the months of pregnancy, birth, and the immediate postpartum period. They provide parent education, logistical and emotional support. They help new mothers make better lifestyle choices and deliver healthier babies. What makes these programs work is the culturally sensitive mentoring within the community.

In Chicago, the community-doula model has made a big difference in the lives of these young moms and their babies. The Chicago Health Connection came up with this model. They trained mentors from the community to work with at-risk moms, many of whom didn’t know where else to turn. These mentors spend time in the neighborhood, finding and befriending pregnant women who need help.

With the guidance of the doula, the Chicago Health Connection found that more young mothers were going to their prenatal care appointments, making better lifestyle choices,
and—not surprisingly—delivering healthier babies. The doulas stay with the moms through the early months, encouraging breastfeeding, cuddling, and interactive play.

Bina Holland is a community-based doula at the Easter Seals Children’s Development Center in Rockford, IL. Bina has had a powerful impact on one of her clients—a 14 year old girl who was 5 months pregnant and severely underweight. Bina taught her about healthy nutrition habits to strengthen her body to carry a baby. Bina also encouraged the young woman to visit her doctor regularly and to openly talk with the doctor about the health status of the baby.

The girl delivered her baby early at 2.5 lbs, and Bina was there to explain the health benefits of breastfeeding. The young mom agreed to nurse her child, and each week the mother monitored the baby’s growth. The child was nursed to health, and the mother successfully graduated from the doula program. Thanks to Bina.

Community-based doulas are a powerful resource for maternal and child health, and the model is effective. In communities that have employed it, outcomes include better prenatal care, higher birth weight, higher breastfeeding rates, better parenting skills, fewer preterm births and c-section deliveries, and delays in subsequent pregnancy for teenagers.

With Chicago Health Connection’s success, they took on the challenge of working with other communities to build their own community-based doula program. Today, they have transformed into Health Connect One, a training organization for communities nationwide interested in starting their own community based doula programs. The need is everywhere, and these women are working hard to make these important services available everywhere for all moms.

I am encouraged by the language in Section 5313 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, Grants to Promote the Community Health Workforce and want to ensure that the definition of community health worker includes community-based doulas. The Federal Government currently funds community-based doula programs through the Maternal and Child Health Bureau’s Special Projects of Regional and National Significance. Expanding the definition of community health workers in the reform bill will give these evidence-based programs greater support to meet the needs of families in underserved communities.

Community-based doula programs are a proven example of the health outcomes that education, prevention and health literacy can bring. With grants to promote the community health workforce, doulas will continue to promote positive health behaviors in pregnant women and improve the lives of families nationwide.

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