

The Advocate's Guide to Supporting Birth Justice

A Long-Term Plan for Repairing Harm in American Indian & African American Communities



BIRTH JUSTICE COLLABORATIVE



◀ PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE

This guide aims to be a valuable reference for community members, advocates, and organizations, encouraging them to leverage their voices to influence policies, practices, and perceptions related to child and maternal health outcomes in African American and American Indian communities. Our objective is to energize public consciousness and provide local advocates with the essential tools to navigate and challenge the systemic barriers hindering birth justice in our communities.

◀ THE BIRTH JUSTICE COLLABORATIVE

The Birth Justice Collaborative (BJC) was launched in 2022, and is a coalition led by African American and American Indian organizations in partnership with Hennepin County formed to co-design strategies that improve birth outcomes in their communities. The collaborative is guided by these principles:

- To align our expertise and lived experience to amplify, partner with, and enhance what already exists and support new work only where there are gaps.
- To bring collective community voice, culture and imagination to strategies that advance birth justice.

◀ LEAD PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Our coalition is lead by organizations that work in partnership and with support from Hennepin County and other community organizations.



Community-Led

The Birth Justice Collaborative employed a distinctive, inclusive, and asset-based process to surface strategies that reflect the envisioned future of American Indian and African American communities. This vision involves a reconnection with cultural strengths and wisdom, while also actively addressing the enduring impacts of historical and contemporary structural racism.



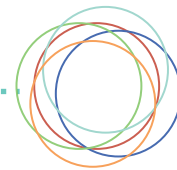


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“Protection is not just about protecting us from bad things happening but also about building up those protective factors that mitigate trauma.”

- Birth Justice Collaborative Partners

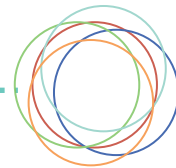


WHAT IS BIRTH JUSTICE?

The term Birth Justice encompasses any policy, practice, mindset, behavior, or ceremony found in community, institutional, spiritual, family, and/or other construct that positively impacts maternal health and well-being from pre-conception through postpartum, reduces exposure to adverse experiences, and/or fosters trauma healing.

Birth justice is a part of reproductive justice and mandates that birthing rights and care options recognize and address the history, life circumstances and culture of historically oppressed groups, from preconception through postpartum.

We recognize justice is a long-term plan for repairing harm, and there needs to be repair not only with the individuals that experience harm but our whole community.



BIRTH JUSTICE COLLABORATIVE POLICY PRIORITIES

The Birth Justice Collaborative (BJC), and its partners, created a shared advocacy agenda including two priorities led by BJC team members and several priorities led by community advocates and partners.

BJC-Led Legislative Priorities

These legislative priorities focus on the importance of providing culturally centered care and healing during the pregnancy and postpartum period with the goal of improving maternal and child health outcomes.

- Funding to plan for and engage community in the development of an **American Indian-focused Birth Center** to improve access to culturally centered prenatal and postpartum care.
- Funding to plan for and engage community in the development of an **African American-focused Homeplace**, offering Healing Centered engagement and support to pregnant and parenting families focusing on culture, connection, and caring.

BJC-Supported Advocacy Priorities

These advocacy priorities represent important strategies to improve access to culturally centered care and support culturally congruent birth workers. BJC is supporting community advocates and partners achieve these policy goals.

- Support **increased reimbursement rates for cultural birth workers** (e.g. community health workers, certified professional midwives, perinatal health navigators, lactation specialists, etc.) and in provider shortage areas.
- Support **expanded billing codes for culturally congruent birth workers** (e.g. certified professional midwives, community health workers, perinatal health navigators, lactation specialist, etc.) and in provider shortage areas.
- Support **increased funding and access to maternal and infant mental health services and care** for African American and American Indian women, birthing people and families.
- Inform legislative **changes to the child welfare system** impacting African American and American Indian pregnant women and families.



◀ Desired Outcomes for American Indian & African American Families

- The BJC is working collaboratively to reach the desired outcomes through policy, practice and systems change aimed at interrupting bias, racism and historical harms.
- Improved birth outcomes and birth experiences for families
- Measurable provider and system behavioral changes that improves birth experiences as reported by families
- Increased families' access to and utilization of meaningful cultural supports and resources from preconception through the postpartum period.
- Increased inclusion of community members and cultural healers in birthing support and resources
- Increased payments for cultural providers that reflect the true costs of addressing the impacts of racism



THE POWER OF YOUR STORY & CULTURAL WISDOM IN ADVOCACY

Traditional birthing practices and cultural wisdom have been kept alive in the African American and American Indian communities through storytelling and ceremony. Many community-led strategies have shown to improve outcomes, patient experience, and the cost-effectiveness of care.

What Can I Do to Support Birth Justice?

1. Tell Your Story

Advocacy is the act of educating yourself, and others, about a topic, issue, or community concern to persuade others to act to address the issue. Decision-makers in local government, elected officials, as well as your health care provider and health plan, relies on individual and community advocacy and stories to identify solutions for the social, health, and economic challenges families face in Minnesota.

Community Advocacy provides African American and American Indian communities with the language to talk about persisting racial disparities in the birth outcomes in Minnesota and the benefits of culturally responsive healthcare. Patient advocacy during the perinatal process empowers families with the knowledge to make informed decisions for their perinatal care.

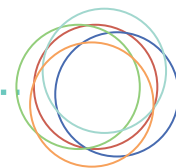
Advocacy with Elected Officials is common, easy, and legal. Anybody can contact their elected officials— including perinatal birth workers in the healthcare system, advocates working for nonprofit organizations, and individuals working for government agencies or tribal nations — to advocate for African American and American Indian families and draw attention to the issues impacting our communities.

When you speak with elected officials or decision-makers, it is important to let them know you are speaking on your own behalf (as a constituent or someone who lives or works in their district), and not your employer. There is strength in numbers. Bringing others with you makes an even bigger impact!

2. Provide Support to Someone Else in Telling Their Story

Inviting African American and American Indian families to contact their elected officials either for personal advocacy or on behalf of families in their community not only increases their social connection to community but empowers families to take ownership of birth justice advocacy in their immediate social circles and continue the practice of storytelling.





TELLING YOUR STORY TO INFLUENCE CHANGE



It is important to remember that **you are the expert** on your own story and experience. The most effective storytellers are passionate, expressive and offer a lesson to their listeners. Statistics and talking points are effective, but the impact of personal stories, first hand experiences, are much more so.

➤ **Name the outcome you want for your community.**

Example: Birth Justice/ Elimination of Racism in Health Care/ Birthing Center

➤ **Tell a story about the care you received or obstacle you faced during the perinatal or postpartum process.**

Example: Who helped you during that time? What was not accessible that should have been? What else should have been different?

➤ **Identify the challenge/barrier inhibiting a more equitable outcome, in supporting your well-being.**

Example: Identify what would improve your experience, or the health outcomes, of others in a similar situation.

➤ **Introduce a solution/policy that will improve health outcomes for families in a similar situation.**

Example: Would access to an advocate have helped during interactions with providers? A new policy could be ensuring an advocate be available to all birthing people, regardless of barriers.

➤ **Make a strong ask of your elected officials.**

Example: Ask them to support your policy position and join you in advocating for birth justice for African American and American Indian birthing people, so that all birthing people can have positive experiences and birth outcomes. Be unapologetic!

Find out who represents you at all levels of government:



PRO TIP

Identify the person who has power to influence the policy/program/service in question. If possible, schedule a meeting with them, or their team, to discuss these issues and tell them your story. Elected officials and decision makers care most about local issues, community advocates may find their stories and suggestions have a greater impact when they target their outreach closer to home.



BIRTH JUSTICE SOLUTIONS

The Health Benefits of Community-Based Care

One of the best-kept secrets of the health care system is the benefit of **community-based healthcare**. Not only have community-based healthcare providers been proven to reduce barriers to healthcare, improve patient health and satisfaction, and offset overall health care costs, but community-based care can also directly impact racial disparities in health outcomes. This is achieved by offering culturally congruent care, providing case management, systems navigation, and facilitating warm handoffs to resources that directly support a family's social determinants of health.



➤ **Birth Centers & Community Health Clinics** are a prime example of community-based healthcare. These centers offer essential preventative health services and culturally appropriate education to the local community. A community-based health center is better positioned to advocate and empower African American and American Indian birthing people, often considered at-risk because of the inequitable birth outcomes, by supporting the cultural, social, and physical needs of the community and working with other agencies to holistically support the entire family, and their cultural identity during the birthing process, and improve health outcomes.



➤ **Voluntary Family Home Visiting**, whether short-term, mid-term or long-term, has proven successful in stabilizing families and improving health outcomes for families and young children. Its **two-generation approach** helps families access culturally appropriate community resources that are responsive to the needs of all families in Minnesota and are one of the best ways to support strong early development and school-readiness because they promote long-term self-sufficiency by strengthening the family structure for parents and children.



➤ **Midwives** are health care professionals who provide high quality perinatal care with the goal of helping people have safe labor and delivery. Midwives often work closely with other perinatal health providers to identify, address, and overcome prenatal concerns and health complications somebody may experience during their pregnancy. **Midwives can reduce the need for induction, cesarean sections, mitigate preterm births, and decrease maternal and infant mortality.**



➤ **Doulas** play a significant role in reducing health care costs related to cesarean and preterm births, improving patient experience by offering informational, emotional, and physical support, from pregnancy through the postpartum period. While other care providers are looking after the safety of a newborn during labor & delivery, **a doula's role is primarily to care for and advocate for the person giving birth.**



➤ **Lactation Consultants** provide prenatal and postpartum education and support to pregnant people and new parents wishing to breastfeed their child and improve breastfeeding rates and outcomes. Lactation consultants are shown to increase the number of people breastfeeding which not only provides an essential bonding experience between a parent and their child, but it also **provides the baby with nutrients necessary for a strong immune system and healthy brain growth and development.**



BIRTH JUSTICE TALKING POINTS

➤ African American Maternal Mortality Rates

23%

Of pregnancy-associated deaths are African American birthing people, despite representing **only 13% of the population.**

➤ American Indian Maternal Mortality Rates

8%

Of pregnancy-associated deaths are American Indian birthing people, despite representing **only 2% of the population.**

➤ The Minnesota Department of Health's Maternal Mortality Review Committee determined that over 60% of pregnancy-associated deaths occurred between six weeks after the pregnancy and one year postpartum and were 100% preventable.



✓ Cost of Structural Racism in Maternal Healthcare

As a result of structural racism, American Indian and African American families face higher rates of mortality, poverty, preterm and cesarean births, low birth-weight, inadequate perinatal care in Minnesota, and experience significant barriers to receiving adequate treatment, leaving our youngest Minnesotans more vulnerable.

✓ Access to Effective Care

African American and American Indian birthing people are more likely to receive late or no prenatal care compared to white birthing people.

✓ Community-based Care Models show Better Results

Research shows that the utilization of midwives and community-based care models have been associated with improved maternal and infant outcomes.

✓ Importance of Cultural Competency in Maternal Health Care and Support

BJC's strategies center culturally competent providers and birth workers because they improve birth outcomes. They deeply understand the historical context of the communities they care for and acknowledge that respecting and upholding diverse cultural backgrounds, traditions, and belief systems is essential for establishing trust with our communities.

Sources.

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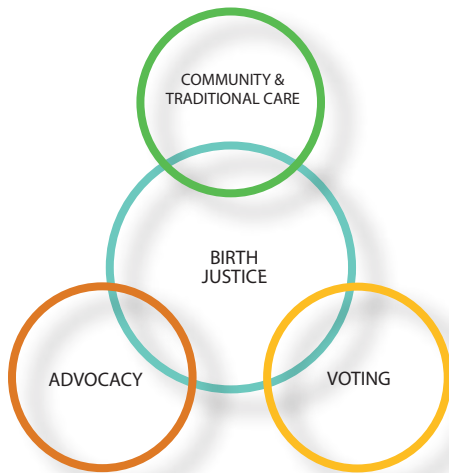
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Almanza, J., Karbeah, J., Kozhimannil, K. & Hardeman, R. (2019). The experiences and motivations of midwives of color in Minnesota: Nothing for us without us. *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*, 64(5), 598-603.



Why Does Birth Justice Matter?

The Birth Justice Collaborative knows that improving the American Indian and African American communities' access to quality, culturally congruent and responsive care will improve maternal, child and family health and well-being from adverse experiences and will play a significant part in healing among American Indian and African American communities.



For more information about the Birth Justice Collaborative, please contact:
info@birthjusticecollaborative.com

Stay in touch:
www.birthjusticecollaborative.com



VOTE

Voting for birth justice champions and candidates reflective of the communities most impacted by disparate birth outcomes is the first step to changing the culture of decision-making bodies in Minnesota. While voting alone will not bring about systemic change, it is a critical piece to advancing and sustaining the hard work of community efforts striving for birth justice.

Register to vote
(scan the QR code for more information)



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Andres Guzman is an artist/illustrator based in Minneapolis, MN and has made work for a wide spectrum of clients, locally and internationally. His favorite tools include india ink and ipad. Andres has been traveling vanlife-style around the USA.

