

# Doulas During the Pandemic

When imagining giving birth, many expecting mothers may envision their partner, family members, or friends around them, providing words of encouragement and comfort during an often arduous time.

However, an additional support person that can be present in the birthing room, which may be lesser known, is the doula. Trained and certified professionals, doulas provide continuous support during labor and birth, as well as during pregnancy and postpartum.

The value of doula work has been backed up by the scientific community. Studies have proven that having continuous support makes a difference; labors are shorter, there is less of a chance for a cesarean, and it is less likely for an infant to be born with a low five-minute Apgar score (the Apgar test is completed five minutes after birth and determines how the newborn is faring outside the mother's womb, with a high score signaling best health). Additionally, with a doula present, birthing persons were less likely to report dissatisfaction.



EveryChild is the proud home to a doula program that provides free services to both Illinois and Iowa. The program is headed by Tina Greer, who supervises three Rock Island County doulas in addition to one full-time doula in Scott County. From July 2020 to date, the team has assisted with 40 births.

Unfortunately, as with many things, the Covid-19 pandemic has altered the normal flow of the birthing process. Visitation abilities in hospitals limit the ability to meet in person, as area hospitals have restricted birth persons to only one support person during provider appointments and labor and birth. Additionally, the virus makes someone outside the immediate personal network attending home births potentially risky.

In short, EveryChild doulas have had to turn to alternative methods to continue to support expectant mothers. Since March of 2020, the doulas have provided assistance and support virtually; video calls,

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phone calls, and text messages all were used to keep the expectant mother in touch with their doula. If needed, iPads are loaned out to ensure the connection is possible.

Tina, who in addition to her supervision duties is a certified doula, admits the initial shift away from in-person labor was disappointing to the doulas, whose job often includes physical comfort and pressure work during labor. Yet, despite the technological barrier, the doulas have worked hard to continue to provide the best level of support possible.

Part of what makes EveryChild's doula program special is the ability to begin meeting with soon-be-mothers weeks before birth. EveryChild doulas are community doulas, rather than private doulas. Tina explains that community doulas provide a special type of support that is often missed with private doulas due to the ability to forge a stronger connection after weeks of meetings and discussions. Private doulas often only meet with the birthing person one to two times pre-birth, assist with the birth, and perhaps follow up a week later. Alternatively, the initial connection between the EveryChild community doula and the expectant mother is formed in the 28th week of pregnancy. The pair then continue to meet every week for one hour until eight weeks postpartum.

During meetings, doulas lead conversations about prenatal education and check how the mother is doing. A main component of education is focused on attachment and bonding. Tina notes that some mothers are surprised to learn that even when the baby is in utero, there are still activities and things mothers can do to bond with the baby.

Prenatal meetings also include connecting mothers with resources, as well as helping expecting mothers create a customized birth wish plan. Using a program called Motherboard, they are educated about different birthing methods and other important information that they can use to make informed decisions. They are then able to take the plan to their providers to ensure coordination in that their wishes are carried out to the greatest extent possible.

During labor, doulas can undertake many different duties, all with the ultimate purpose of helping the mother have the best experience possible. In non-Covid times, they can massage and apply counter pressure, or run hot water over them as they take a bath. They also check in with the other support people in the room, engaging them and suggesting ways they can help--something they can do virtually as well. From afar and in the room, doulas can also provide encouragement and emotional and mental support.

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In the hour after birth, a time that Tina calls, “one of the most important times in all of our life”, doulas help protect space for mother and baby (and partner). Allowing alone time for the parents to bond with their newborn during this time is critical, and doulas help ensure this time is not interrupted by excited family or friends.

After birth, doulas continue to meet with mothers. The unique opportunity of the community doulas to connect in a more long term also gives mothers additional support concerning postpartum depression. Mothers are screened for a baseline of depression during pregnancy and then screened again four weeks after birth. These screens can help give an indication of who might need a check-in or perhaps a referral, ultimately helping both mother and infant.

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Ultimately, whether interactions are in-person or virtual, EveryChild doulas work hard to ensure the best outcomes for mom and baby. Upon reflecting on her own doula experiences, Tina remarks that “making that connection and helping mothers execute their wishes” during birth is a powerful and rewarding experience.



*Originally posted on the Now What? Blog on 2.25.21 The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to*

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

*Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.*

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