



New York City Council Hearing

Improving Maternal Health in New York City

Committee on Hospitals

Committee on Women and Gender Equity

Wendy Wilcox, MD, MPH, MBA, FACOG

Chief Women's Health Officer, Chief of OB/GYN

NYC Health + Hospitals

October 23, 2025

Good afternoon Chairwoman Narcisse, Chairwoman Louis and members of the Committee on Hospitals and Women and Gender Equity. I am Dr. Wendy Wilcox, Chief Women's Health Officer of NYC Health + Hospitals, and Chief of OB/GYN at NYC Health + Hospitals/Woodhull. In addition to these roles, I have been with the System for over 15 years, working at acute-care centers which include Jacobi, North Central Bronx, and Kings County in a clinical role. Maternal and women's health has been the foundation of my career. In addition to my clinical work, I serve as Co-Chair of the New York State Maternal Mortality Review Board and the Brooklyn Borough Maternal Health Task Force, and as a member of several statewide and national bodies dedicated to improving maternal outcomes and advancing birth equity.

At NYC Health + Hospitals (the System), we are particularly focused on helping to reduce the unacceptable maternal mortality rates among women of color in New York City. NYC Health + Hospitals is a leader in providing quality, culturally responsive health care services that address the disparities and race-based health care gaps that have historically and disproportionately affected the diverse population of patients we proudly serve. This past year, NYC Health + Hospitals/Bellevue, Elmhurst, Lincoln, and Woodhull were recognized by U.S. News & World Report 2025 Best Hospitals for Maternity Care.

Addressing the maternal health crisis requires a multi-pronged approach: from focusing on preventative health care to addressing social detriments of health, there are various pathways to ensuring that maternal mortality and morbidity are addressed efficiently. Over the past two decades, NYC Health + Hospitals has made significant strides in improving maternal health outcomes, with a focus on reducing maternal mortality and addressing health inequities. In collaboration with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, all 11 hospitals in the System have participated in the Safe Motherhood Initiative, which developed safety protocols targeting the leading causes of maternal mortality in New York. This initiative has helped standardize best practices across the System, ensuring

better care and fewer complications during childbirth. In addition, in 2018, the health system launched six state-of-the-art simulation labs in trauma centers to allow obstetrical staff, including OB and anesthesia physicians, nurses, midwives, and physician assistants, to practice handling critical obstetric emergencies. While the simulation labs initially focused on the three top causes of maternal mortality, its success invited expansion over the recent years into covering topics including, cardiac resuscitation during pregnancy, obstetric hemorrhage, and shoulder dystocia, are crucial in reducing maternal mortality rates and preventing avoidable, potentially fatal complications.

That same year, NYC Health + Hospitals established the Maternal Home to provide comprehensive care for patients with complex pregnancy-related conditions. The Maternal Home offers support through a team of social workers, maternal care coordinators, doulas, and mental health professionals addressing both clinical and social determinants of health, improving access to necessary behavioral health services. Since its launch, the program has enrolled over 8,000 unique patients, supported over 60,000 births, and made over 27,000 referrals. By putting pregnant patients at the center of their care, results show the importance of prioritizing connected care teams throughout the pregnancy journey.

On October 14th of this year, the System formally announced The NYC Baby Boxes program at NYC Health + Hospitals/Jacobi, Lincoln, Elmhurst, and Kings County, where more than 7,000 babies are delivered each year. This program aims to support new parents by alleviating early financial stress and provide essential postpartum and newborn care supplies. In collaboration with the Mayor's Office and community partners, the contents of the baby boxes are designed to address the most common needs which are not covered by existing benefits to directly address stressors in the postpartum period. All babies born at these sites will receive a box during the pilot program. Sourced from local and Minority- and Women-Owned business enterprises. Items in each box, set to be distributed later this month, will include the following items for parent and baby:

- Two onesies
- Footie pajama
- Cap
- Burp cloth
- Swaddle blanket
- Bath towel
- Newborn diapers
- Baby wipes
- Two types of diaper rash cream
- Baby shampoo
- Nipple cream
- Nursing Pads
- Postpartum pads
- Breastmilk bags
- Resource guides

Since 2022, NYC Health + Hospitals has a contract with Natera, a cell-free DNA testing company, to support its prenatal screening program for two essential services. The first, Non-Invasive Prenatal Tests, enables clinicians to analyze fetal DNA and detect common chromosomal abnormalities. The second service, Carrier Screens, allows us to test parents' DNA before or during pregnancy to identify potential genetic mutations that could pose a risk for to the baby's health. Additionally, Health + Hospitals utilizes Triton, a tool that measures blood loss to prevent hemorrhaging, which is a leading cause of maternal mortality.

Health + Hospitals always strives to bring preventative care to patients, and this past August, our acute care site at Kings launched a Cardio-Obstetric program which aims to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity among women of color by focusing on heart disease during and after pregnancy. This program additionally focuses on targeting risk factors which include hypertension, obesity, and diabetes during the prenatal period as well through one year postpartum. We have also partnered with community-based organizations to promote health education and refer individuals to this program.

As part of NYC Health + Hospitals' Behavioral Health Blueprint, we highlight the System's commitment to providing comprehensive substance use care for New Yorkers, including pregnant individuals. The RISE Center, which stands for Recovery, Integrated Support, and Empowerment, is expected to open in 2026 at NYC Health + Hospitals/Lincoln. It will focus on early intervention to support healthy pregnancies and break the intergenerational cycle of substance use and dependency. Partnering with additional programs on site, our aim is to the RISE Center will serve pregnant and parenting people affected by substance use disorder and their children. Utilizing a family-centered model, we aim to provide a deeply welcoming and supportive services in one location. With wrap-around services on site, families will have access to childcare, food pantries, parenting education, referrals to treatment, and screenings.

Beyond programmatic development, Health + Hospitals is also revitalizing physical spaces to improve birthing options for pregnant people at Kings, South Brooklyn Health, and Woodhull. These updated designs include the creation of four new, private birthing rooms for low risk pregnancies, greater integration of doula and midwifery support, and reconfigured staff support areas to improve workflow and collaboration.

Moreover, all 11 hospitals have achieved Baby Friendly status, a certification that highlights their leadership in promoting and supporting breastfeeding, a key factor in improving maternal and infant

health. Our system's cesarean delivery rate also remains consistently below the state average, underscoring our success in reducing unnecessary interventions.

NYC Health + Hospitals remains committed to ensuring that all New Yorkers who embark on their pregnancy journey in our System continue to receive the highest standard of care. By providing patients with wrap-around services, innovative tools, and spaces safely and efficiently work with care team, we will continue to improve maternal health outcomes throughout New York City.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today on this critical topic. I'm happy to answer any questions.