



The mission of the NAACP is to ensure the political, educational, social and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.

Governor Maura Healey
Massachusetts State House,
24 Beacon St.,
Office of the Governor, Room 280,
Boston, MA 02133.

August 22, 2023

Dear Governor Healey:

On behalf of the Worcester Chapter of the NAACP we are writing to appeal to UMass Memorial Health, as well as the Healey administration, to take whatever steps are necessary to preserve safe and appropriate access to maternity care for mothers and newborns in Northern Worcester County by rescinding the proposed closure of the Birthing Center at UMass Memorial-Health Alliance-Clinton Hospital's Leominster campus – the latest in a series of such closures that impact the health and safety of the most vulnerable residents of the Commonwealth, with the most tragic impact to be born, once again, by Black, brown, and other low income residents living in those communities.

Our appeal for your support follows a public hearing, conducted by DPH on July 24th, where hundreds turned out to deliver close to four hours of compelling testimony in unanimous opposition to UMass Memorial Health's decision to close the Birthing Center, which resulted in a finding by the DPH that the Birthing Center is indeed an "essential service necessary for preserving access and health status within the hospital's service area." The DPH findings call into question the corporation's rationale for the closure and highlights the community's concerns regarding the closure's "disproportionate effect on marginalized communities including...Black communities, and Hispanic/brown communities," leaving mothers to deliver in overcrowded emergency departments or on the side of highways as they travel to birthing centers in faraway communities, including Worcester. We have also heard from advocates and caregivers here in Worcester who report that there is no way the UMass Memorial can safely and effectively absorb the 500 – 700 families who will be impacted by this decision, thereby jeopardizing the quality and safety of maternity care throughout all of Worcester County.

Our opposition to the closing is given more urgency with the release this month of an alarming report by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health showing a dramatic increase in the rate of serious complications and maternal child deaths from labor and delivery in our state with Black women consistently experiencing the highest rates, more than double the rate for white, non-Hispanic women. This is the very population identified by DPH as most at risk by the Birthing Center closure.

The issue of health equity and addressing disparities in care for communities of Black, brown and low income residents is the major focus of both state and federal initiatives, as noted in the DPH report and the Secretary of HHS's Healthy People 2020 and 2030 goals, and the issue of reducing disparities in maternal child health has been a focus of the NAACP for more than a decade and with a 2022 resolution, Improving Equitable Birth and Maternal Health Outcomes for Black Families. A quote by Governor Healey in the press release about the DPH report clearly articulates the same concerns about the need for access to services like the Birthing Center that were voiced at the DPH hearing and which we echo here, when you stated, "This report shows that there is much more work that we need to do to address racial and gender inequities in health care. **It is essential that everyone has access to comprehensive, high-quality and inclusive maternal health care. We can and must do better for mothers, for kids and**

for families.” We would also argue that a decision to close this service flies in the face of the UMass Memorial Health’s stated mission of “improving the health of the people of our diverse communities of Central New England through culturally sensitive excellence” and your stated value to guide your decision making by “supporting diverse communities.”

We agree with our esteemed Governor that we must do better to protect the health of the Commonwealth’s mothers and newborns, specifically for our Black and Brown residents. In the conclusion of its findings the letter by DPH calls upon UMass Memorial Health to identify a means of maintaining this service. Failure to save this service, in the stark words of one of the community advocates who spoke at the DPH hearing, will result in “killing Black and brown people.” We therefore call upon UMass Memorial Health and your administration to work with members of the legislature to find a way to preserve this.

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