



Doula-Friendly Hospitals Pilot Initiative - March 2026

Maternal health outcomes remain inequitable across New York State, particularly for Black birthing people and low-income communities. Community-based doulas are proven to improve birth experiences and outcomes, yet they are not consistently integrated into hospital care teams due to unclear roles, lack of training/education on doula care, inconsistent policies, and institutional barriers. Health Leads has worked with clinical partners and doula organizations to support doula integration and improved access to doula care, including developing a Toolkit for Expanding Doula-Friendly Hospitals.¹

With funding from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation, Health Leads is now launching a Doula-Friendly Hospital Pilot Initiative to support **three partner sites** to implement and evaluate a focused intervention to promote doula-friendliness, aligned with the Doula-friendly Hospital Model and Guidebook.² This multi-year initiative will bring hospitals and community-based doulas together to test practical approaches to collaboration and care integration. The pilot will assess how doula-friendly practices can be strengthened in care settings and generate evidence to inform the development of a statewide doula-friendly hospital designation.

A doula-friendly hospital³ is one that:

- Recognizes that the doula has been chosen by the client to be part of the labor support team, and includes the doula as part of the integrated team for the birth.
- Allows the doula in the labor and delivery room, whether or not the allotted number of support people has been reached.
- Ensures that the doula is treated with respect.
- Understands that the doula supports the client and her desires.
- Allows and supports non-medical comfort techniques for labor, including but not limited to varied labor positions, movement, breathing techniques, aromatherapy, comforting touch, visualization, hydrotherapy, and the use of a birth ball and/or peanut ball.
- Facilitates the provision of continuous, calming support by allowing the doula to be present in triage and, absent a compelling reason to the contrary, for procedures such as epidural insertion and cesarean section.
- Ensures that the doula is able to support the client post-partum, while at the hospital, for breastfeeding and additional comfort measures.

Pilot Purpose

Through the pilot, partners will implement and evaluate strategies that support respectful collaboration between clinical staff and doulas while expanding access to culturally congruent care. Learning from the pilot will build an evidence base to guide sustainable system change across hospitals. Participating partners will not only try new practices, but also help interpret findings and refine what works in different care environments.

¹<https://healthleadsusa.org/news-resources/toolkit-for-expanding-doula-friendly-hospitals/>

²<https://www.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/ms/hospital-doula-friendliness-guidebook.pdf>

³https://healthleadsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/NYCDA_Principles-of-Doula-Support_June-2024.pdf

What Participating Sites Will Do

Participating sites will include both a hospital and a community-based doula organization. Partner hospitals and doula organizations will work together to:

- Implement selected doula-friendly practices and policies
- Strengthen referral pathways and access to doula care
- Test collaboration processes within real births
- Contribute to evaluation, reflect on experiences, and share learning across sites

Participating sites will receive technical resources, action planning guidance, and other support from Health Leads over a one year period. Participating sites will also participate in a participatory evaluation process to generate site-specific and pilot-wide learning that can support continued implementation and sustainability of improved practices in the future.

Timeline

Partners will be identified through an application and selection process in March-June 2026. Following an orientation, onboarding, and baseline assessment process, partners will refine and implement a customized doula-friendliness intervention from mid-2026 to mid-2027. An endline evaluation of the outcomes of the pilot intervention will take place in late 2027.

Pilot Aims

Through the pilot and its learning, this initiative aims to:

1. **Pilot Evidence-Based Doula Integration Practices:** Select diverse hospital-doula partnerships to implement and test integration practices.
2. **Expand Patient Access to Doula Care:** Increase access to culturally congruent doula support by reducing institutional barriers and formalizing referral partnerships.
3. **Strengthen Clinician-Doula Collaboration:** Develop sustainable models for effective interprofessional teamwork.
4. **Build Foundation for a Statewide Doula-Friendly Designation:** Use pilot findings to inform future standards and recognition of doula-friendly hospitals.

The pilot will produce:

- Practical guidance for integrating doulas into care teams
- Evidence on what improves collaboration and access
- Shared learning across hospitals and community partners
- Recommendations for a statewide doula-friendly designation
- Scalable approaches to equitable maternity care

Through this pilot initiative, Health Leads and its partners will help improve patient experience and birth equity while supporting care teams to work together more effectively.