

Public Health Committee

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)
*S.B. 1: An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health
Care in Response to the Pandemic*

Submitted by: Nicole Sanclemente, Policy and Program Associate
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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide, nonprofit organization that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-seven years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate in the development of policy solutions that enhance women's economic security and increase gender equity in our state.

CWEALF encourages the Committee to support *S.B. 1: An Act Equalizing Comprehensive Access to Mental, Behavioral and Physical Health Care in Response to the Pandemic*.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought upon new and prevalent issues in the lives of Connecticut residents, as well as exacerbated existing inequities ones that have affected many communities in our state long before the pandemic hit. One of those prevailing concerns is the access to health care during these turbulent times. Women, especially women of color, have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic specifically when it comes to the health disparities they face.

Defining the Doula Profession

Senate Bill No. 1 is especially crucial to doulas in Connecticut, and consequently, to Black mothers in the state. A doula is a non-medical professional trained in childbirth who provides emotional, physical and informational support to a person who is expecting a child, is experiencing labor, or has recently given birth. Title protection is critical in order to prevent misrepresentation of the doula profession and to provide a stronger identity and credibility.

The maternal mortality rate of the general population in Connecticut is currently 19.0 per 100,000 births. The maternal mortality rate for Black women is 48 per 100,000 births, compared to 14.8 for white women. This significant disparity is evidence that maternal mortality is a racial justice issue. In order for our state to combat the long-standing inequities found in access to healthcare, we must focus on solutions that take into account the social, political and historical context of race and ethnicity in the United States and in Connecticut respectfully.

A doula's purpose is to help people have safe, memorable and empowering birthing experiences, but are not limited to just the pregnancy and labor period. Doulas also provide much needed support for new parents and their infants after they are born. Evidence-based outcomes of doula services include a decrease in requests for pain medications such as epidurals, fewer Cesarean births, a reduction in low birth weight and premature births, and better Newborn Assessment Scores which summarizes the health of newborn children against infant mortality. S.B 1 would ensure that parents are given the opportunity to hire a doula if they want or decide to.

CWEALF recommends the following:

- Lines 204-207 reflect a "doula" means a trained, nonmedical professional who provides physical, emotional and informational support to a pregnant person before, during, and after birth, in person or virtually;
- The efforts of the study to determine whether the Department of Public Health should establish a state certification process by which a person can be certified as a state doula to ensure no doula be barred from this process.

Declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis

CWEALF also supports S.B 1's proposal of declaring racism a public health crisis in Connecticut. Systemic and structural racism severely affect the conditions in which people are born, work, live and age, as well as the many components of their overall safety and well-being. Senate Bill No. 01 will help our state understand and address racism and the multitude of ways it is trickling into other aspects of people's lives including, but not limited to, access to quality housing, education, transportation, and other social determinants of health.

Racism has already been declared a public health crisis in five other states and in 20 municipalities in Connecticut. The COVID-19 pandemic is one example of racism linked to the inequities found in healthcare and health disparities. Black and Latino residents have seen disproportionately high rates of cases and deaths compared to their white counterparts. These cases are the result of income inequality, housing and education discrimination that have led Black and Latino communities in Connecticut to be more likely to work in the essential workforce, live in crowded housing, and experience existing health conditions that make the COVID-19 infection more dangerous. Communities of color are less likely to have a primary doctor, lack preventative care and are two times more likely to postpone without care. Other health disparities linked to racism in our state include food insecurity, asthma and diabetes.

Senate Bill No. 01 is an opportunity for our state to lead the pursuit of racial justice with action. It will declare racism a public health crisis in the State of Connecticut, establish a Truth and Reconciliation Committee to examine racial disparities in public health in the state, require hospitals to include implicit bias training, establish a task force to examine and make recommendations to reduce racial inequities in maternal mortality and severe maternal morbidity, and conduct a study on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Connecticut based on race, ethnicity, language and geography.

We support the recommendations of our advocacy partners who are leading in this work to strengthen this legislation. CWEALF encourages the Committee to support S.B. 1 to ensure Connecticut takes its next step forward to combatting the existing racial inequities and to help many families who have been left behind in past legislation and the other systems that influence their ability to live healthy, safe and successful lives.