

BirthWell Partners, established in 2011, is dedicated to enhancing the well-being of Alabama families by removing obstacles to doula support. The mission is carried out by training non-medical labor support professionals, known as doulas, to provide comprehensive assistance during pregnancy, labor, birth, and postpartum. BirthWell fosters diversity and inclusivity through its innovative Work-Study doula training program. Over a decade, the organization has trained a significant number of doulas, prioritizing racial and economic diversity. Offering services to pregnant individuals on Medicaid at no cost, BirthWell has reached over 1500 families, hosted numerous workshops, and collected valuable data on trainees and birth outcomes. This report summarizes a decade of impactful programming, emphasizing the positive influence of BirthWell doulas on reducing disparities in birth outcomes and improving overall maternal and infant health in Alabama.

BirthWell Trains Doulas:

Since 2011, BirthWell has held several Birth Doula Workshops each year, facilitated by DONA International Approved Birth Doula Trainer and BirthWell Program Director Dalia Abrams. From 2014-2023, BirthWell held 30 doula workshops, training 354 people, primarily from AL, but including participants from 8 other states. One of BirthWell's most important achievements has been to increase the racial diversity of doulas serving in AL. In total, BirthWell has trained 168 people of color (47% of all trainees). Over time, as the role of the doula in addressing health disparities in the Black community has grown, so too has the proportion of Black doulas trained (Fig. 1).



Participants in the November 2023 Birth Doula Workshop.

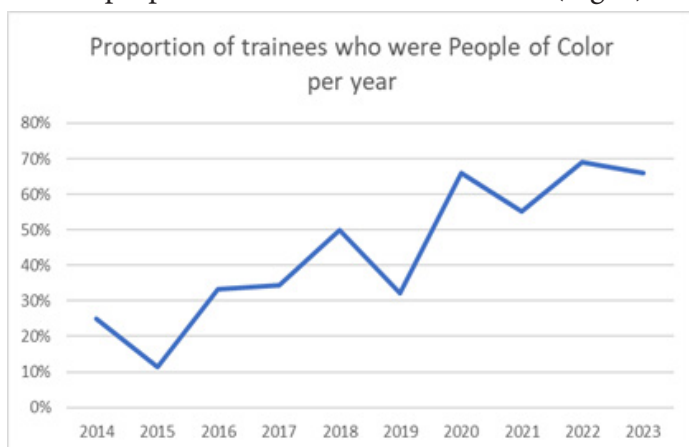


Figure 1

BirthWell also set out to increase the economic diversity of doulas. This was achieved by eliminating barriers to training through our innovative work-study program.

Work-study removes financial barriers for doulas and for pregnant families. Participants receive doula training and then gain hands-on experience by providing services to 2-3 BirthWell clients. This win-win system helps new doulas get started in the profession, while families who are in need are able to have doula support for free. During this 10-year reporting period, BirthWell provided work-study positions for 93 doulas; 23% of all doulas trained.

BirthWell doula workshops have additionally brought doula skills into Alabama hospitals by training 24 nurses who were working in Labor and Delivery departments of the following hospitals: Brookwood Baptist, Princeton Baptist, RMC Anniston, Shelby Baptist, St. Vincent's, UAB, and Andalusia.

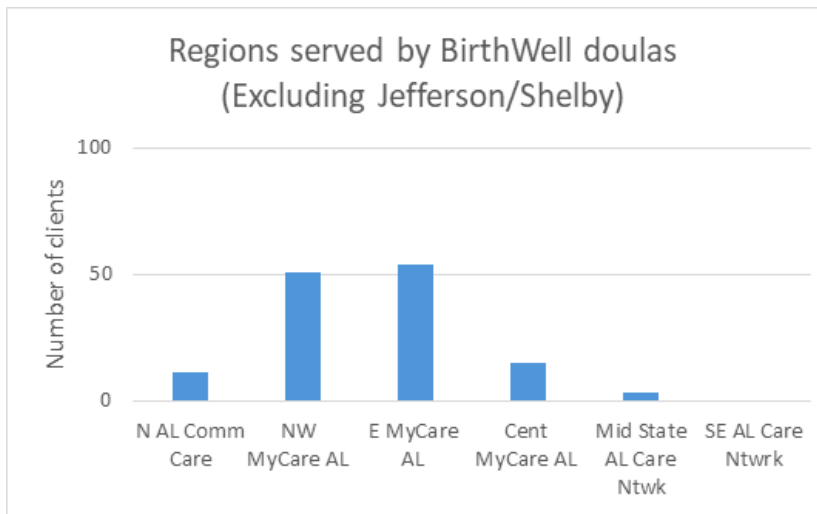
BirthWell Doulas Serve Communities Most In Need of Additional Support:

BirthWell’s goal has always been to ensure that anyone who wanted to have a doula could have one at their side during pregnancy, labor, birth and postpartum, regardless of their ability to pay.

Through the work-study program, and with the additional help of many volunteer doulas coming through BirthWell’s doula training, 177 new doulas were connected with their first clients. Pregnant individuals who could not otherwise afford to pay out-of-pocket for a doula were able to receive services while giving valuable experience to new doulas. As one former volunteer stated about the experience of providing support to a BirthWell client, “I felt like I received as much as I gave.”

BirthWell began contracting with experienced doulas in 2019, through the Jefferson County Department of Health advised Fund managed by the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham. Since then, with dedicated funding and grants from a variety of sources (ADMH, ALPQC, IPC, etc.) BirthWell has contracted with 17 doulas, 70% of whom are people of color, to serve 134 clients.

Since 2014, BirthWell doulas have provided over 1400 prenatal visits, attended 562 births, and provided over 500 postpartum visits. In total, between 2014 and 2023, BirthWell doulas served residents of 43 of the 67 counties in AL. The majority (76%) of families served by BirthWell doulas were residents of Jefferson and Shelby Counties. The remaining 24% of BirthWell clients were from around the state. The distribution of clients served from the other six Medicaid Care Regions is shown in figure 2. Other demographic characteristics of BirthWell clients are described in Table 1.



AL ACHN Regional Care Networks



Figure 2. The majority of clients served are residents of Mid-State AL Care Network. Residents served from other regions are represented here.

Table 1: Client characteristics	Clients served
Medicaid insurance	94.50%
Single	72.30%
Black	63.00%
Teen	7.30%
Age range	13-44 years
Average age	26.5 years
Proportion of clients with 1 st pregnancy	40.10%
Proportion of clients with 2 nd pregnancy	24.60%
Proportion of clients with 3 rd pregnancy	14.30%
Proportion of clients with 4 th or more pregnancy	21.00%

BirthWell has worked hard to increase awareness of the role of doulas in improving health outcomes for families, mothers, and babies. Tabling at health fairs, posting on social-media and other outreach efforts have helped bring doula support into the mainstream in our area. Thus, interest in having a BirthWell doula has increased over the years.

In 2019 and early 2020, the number of inquiries was beginning to surge. Then, during Covid, hospitals strictly restricted the number of visitors allowed, leading people to have to choose between having a family member or a doula at their birth. But after a two-year drop in demand, 2023 saw a large surge in inquiries and a record number of clients served (figure 3).

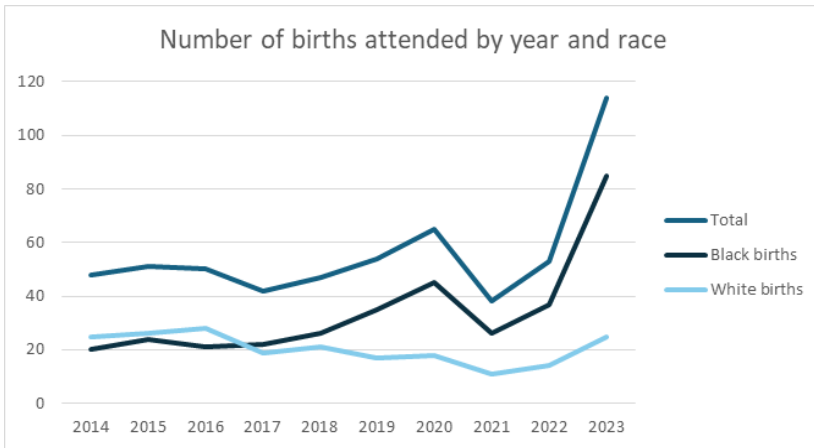


Figure 3



Racial disparities in birth outcomes, a persistent problem in the USA and especially in AL, has lately come to the fore in the news and in public policy. In response, doulas have become recognized nationally as an innovative approach to mitigating bias in the health care setting. In Alabama, this has led to a significant increase in the number of Black women seeking doula training as well as seeking doula support. BirthWell strives to provide race-concordant care.

Demographic data on the clients served by BirthWell shows an increase in the proportion of Black clients over the years (Fig. 4)

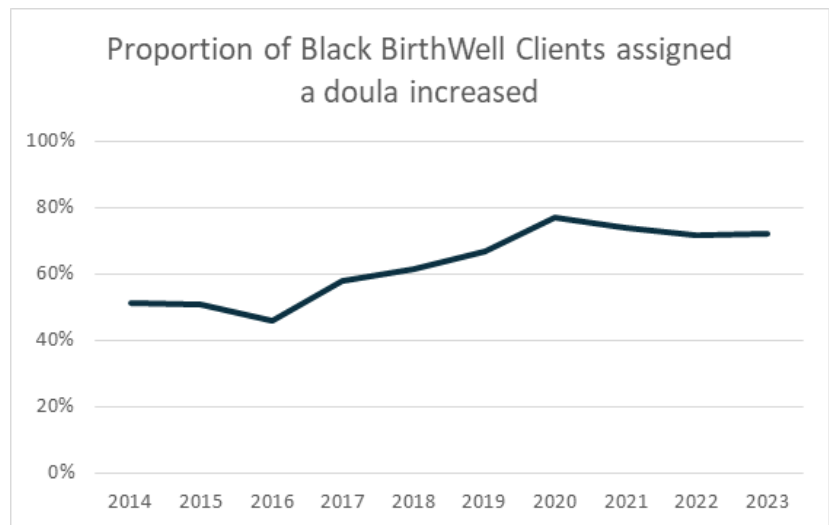


Figure 4

BirthWell Clients Benefit From the Support of Their Doulas!

BirthWell was founded to improve the health of birth-givers and their babies. Based on years of international research on the impacts of doula support, BirthWell founders set out to eliminate financial barriers to doula support. Recognizing that race and SES concordant care would have the biggest impact, BirthWell set out to increase the racial and SES diversity of the doula workforce. Data collected from ten years of BirthWell doulas serving under-resourced, Medicaid insured birth givers in Alabama match the extensive research on the impact of doulas on birth outcomes. While being born too soon and too small are top risk factors for poor infant health, BirthWell doula clients are less likely to be born preterm or low-birth-weight (figures 6a and 6b).

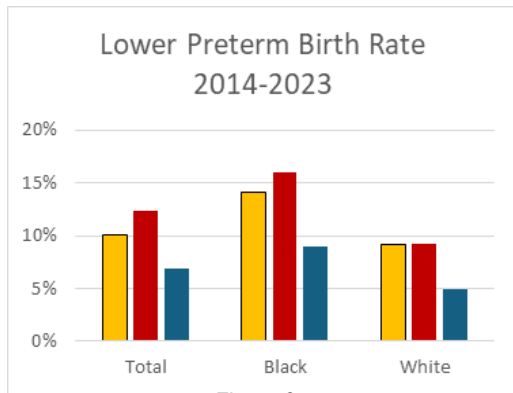


Figure 6a

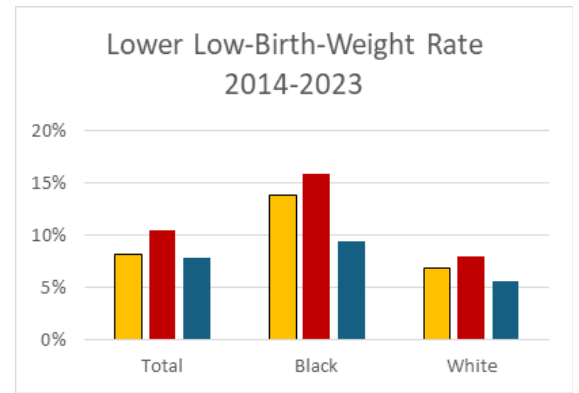


Figure 6b

Being born by cesarean section increases health risks for both birth-givers and their babies, but BirthWell clients have reduced c-section rates (figure 7a). Many birth-givers hope to avoid the risks associated with medical pain management through epidurals. BirthWell clients are more likely to meet this goal (figure 7b).

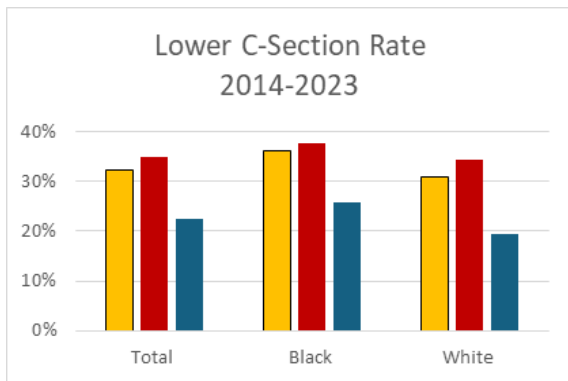


Figure 7a

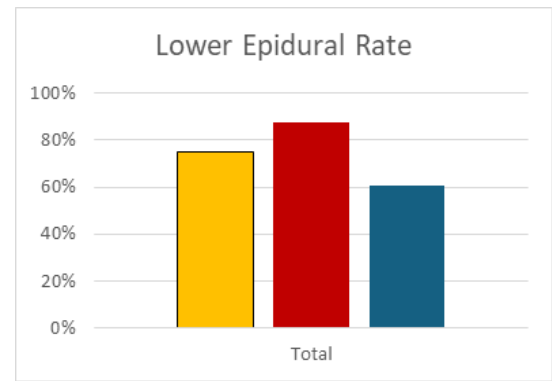


Figure 7b

Breastfeeding is globally recognized as the safest and healthiest choice for babies, and also for the parents who feed them. Research consistently shows doula supported mothers are more likely to meet their personal breastfeeding goals. BirthWell babies were also more likely to be breastfed compared to national and Alabama rates (figure 8).

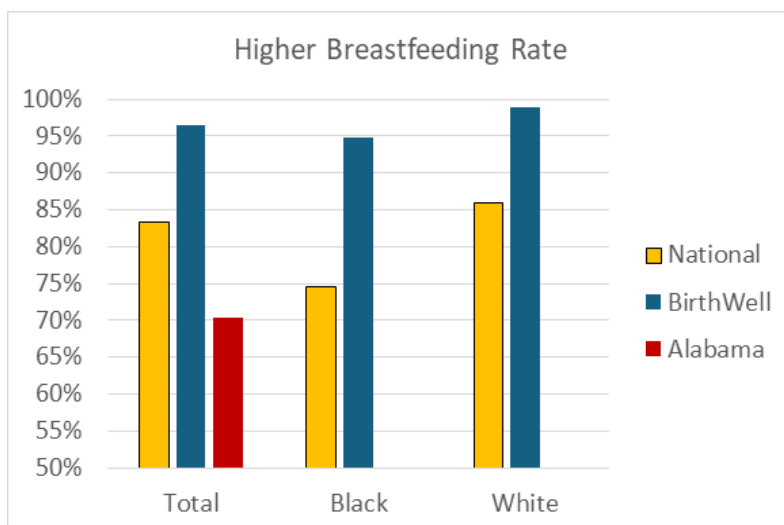


Figure 8: Percentage of babies who were ever fed breast milk



Beyond Doula Support: Childbirth Classes

BirthWell has been providing free childbirth preparation classes in the Birmingham community since 2013. During this ten-year reporting period, BirthWell directors Susan Petrus and Dalia Abrams, both of whom are Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educators, taught 165 classes for 343 individuals. Online and in-person classes were held for BirthWell doula clients, and in-person classes were held for residents of substance use recovery programs at Aletheia's House and Olivia's House, for Early Head Start participants at JCCEO in Sherman Heights, and for pregnant students at Woodlawn and Tarrant High Schools.



Childbirth class participants at Aletheia House learn to make low-cost baby carriers. Baby carrying promotes bonding!

In Sum:

BirthWell Partners' mission is to improve the health of Alabama families by eliminating barriers to doula support. A doula is a non-medical labor support professional who provides informational support during pregnancy, labor, birth and postpartum, and provides physical and emotional support during labor and birth.

BirthWell accomplishes this goal by increasing the number and diversity of doulas serving Alabama families through an innovative Work-Study program and DONA International Approved Birth Doula Workshops. BirthWell's doulas provide support at no cost for pregnant individuals who are uninsured or on Medicaid for their maternity care. Since its founding in 2011, Birth Well has hosted a total of 35 trainings for 425 doulas, and served well over 1500 families through community childbirth classes, and doula support that includes one-on-one prenatal and postpartum visits and labor support. BirthWell Doulas have supported clients at the births of nearly 700 babies! Throughout this period, BirthWell has collected data in order to help it improve programming and track community impact.

References:

Preterm Birth (PTB) and Low Birthweight (LBW) baseline data sources

National PTB and LBW rates from 2014 to 2021 are from the CDC Final Data Report for each year in National Vital Statistics Reports <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm>

PTB and LBW rates for Alabama from 2014 to 2020 are CDC supplemental tables of the Births: Final Data reports for each year in National Vital Statistics Reports <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm>

PTB and LBW for Alabama in 2021 are from the Alabama Department of Health Infant Mortality Report 2021, 11/17/2022 <https://www.alabamapublichealth.gov/healthstats/assets/infant-mortality2021.pdf>

National PTB rate for 2022 is from CDC's Births: Provisional Data for 2022, NVSR N. 28, June 2023 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr028.pdf>

No national or AL rates for LBW in 2022 and 2023 are available at this time.

No Alabama PTB rates for 2023 are available at this time.

Epidural rate baseline data sources

National Epidural rates for 2016 to 2020 are from supplemental tables to the Births: Final Data reports for each year in National Vital Statistics Reports <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm>

Alabama Epidural rate is for 2016 from the web site: CesareanRates.com <https://www.cesareanrates.org/epidural-anesthesia-utilization-by-state>

Cesarean Section (CS) baseline data sources

National CS rates for 2014 to 2021 are from the CDC Final Data reports for each year from National Vital Statistics Reports <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr>

National CS rates by race are only available for 2016-2021 from the National Vital Statistics Reports

National CS rates in 2022, total and by race are from the CDC's Births: Provisional Data for 2022, NVSR N. 28, June 2023 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr028.pdf>

Alabama CS rates for 2014 to 2020 come from CDC supplemental tables of Births: Final Data for each year, National Vital Statistics Reports <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/index.htm>

Alabama CS rates by race are only available for 2016 to 2020, also from these supplemental tables.

The Alabama CS rate for 2021 is from the CDC and does not include data by race: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/cesarean_births/cesareans.htm

The Alabama CS rate for 2022 is from CDC's Births: Provisional Data for 2022, NVSR N. 28, June 2023 <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr028.pdf> and does not include data by race.

Breastfeeding rate baseline data sources

Breastfeeding (BF) data reported here are for “any breastfeeding”, or “ever breastfed” rates as follows:

National rate in 2014: CDC National Immunization Survey data reporting on BF for babies born 2002-2014 https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/results.html

Alabama rate in 2014: CDC National Immunization Survey https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/rates-any-exclusive-bf-state-2014.htm

National and Alabama rate in 2015: CDC Breastfeeding report card US 2018 (reports BF rates for babies born in 2015) <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>

National and Alabama rate in 2016: National Immunization Survey https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/rates-any-exclusive-bf-state-2016.htm

National BF rate in 2017: National Immunization Survey Results: Breastfeeding 2011-2018 https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/results.html

Alabama BF rate in 2017: Breastfeeding Report Card 2020 for babies born in 2017 <https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/reportcard.htm>

National and Alabama rate in 2018: National Immunization Survey Results: Breastfeeding 2011-2018 https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/results.html

National rate in 2019: Breastfeeding Among US children Born 2013-2020 - National Immunization Survey-Child https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/results.html

There are no data for BF rates in AL in 2019.

National and Alabama rate in 2020: Breastfeeding Among US children Born 2013-2020 - National Immunization Survey-Child https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding/data/nis_data/results.html

There are no BF data for national or Alabama rates from 2021 to 2023.