



**Proponent Testimony – House Bill 142**  
**Tonya Fulwider, Associate Director**  
**Mental Health America of Ohio**

Dear Chair Manchester, Vice Chair Cutrona, Ranking Member Liston, and Committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of House Bill 142, sponsored by Representatives Crawley and Brinkman. Mental Health America of Ohio supports this legislation that establishes a four-year pilot for the provision of doula services in the Medicaid Program.

Nearly 20 years ago, I co-founded a maternal mental health nonprofit organization, Perinatal Outreach and Encouragement for Moms (POEM), after my own experience with postpartum depression. It was not the clinical system of care that truly helped me and my daughter. It was a peer supporter who took the time to listen nonjudgmentally and support me -- that saved us. Doulas also offer that person-centered care in the broader context of maternal health. I now serve as the Associate Director at Mental Health America of Ohio, and POEM merged into the MHAOhio organization several years ago – it's now the largest of our many programs that focus on access-to-care and addressing gaps in our mental health system. POEM's laser-focus on lifting up mothers has an ally in the doula care model.

We know that Ohio has an alarming rate of infant and maternal morbidity and mortality with significant racial disparities in birth outcomes for Black mothers and babies. Doula services, which provide pivotal support to mothers before, during, and after childbirth, offer a way to address some of those inequities and generate potential savings in the long term to Medicaid.

While we may be seeing the ending of the COVID-19 pandemic, the associated mental health pandemic is far from over. Postpartum depression and related disorders were already extremely common pre-COVID – the most common complication of childbirth. Depression and anxiety in expectant and new mothers have risen rapidly, and we need effective partners in whole care for new moms and families, like doulas.

At Mental Health America of Ohio, our mission is to transform how people think about mental illness, make it easier to get help, and give people the support they need to get better and stay better. We believe in inclusivity and work with all individuals and their families through each step on the path to wellness, from making initial referrals, to providing free mental health services, to helping maintain stability and productivity once they are achieved.

We encourage you to pass House Bill 142 to launch a Medicaid-covered pilot program to support doula services.

Thank you,  
Tonya Fulwider

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