



**Proponent Testimony- House Behavioral Health Committee
HCR16 — Recognizing the Importance of Perinatal Mental Health
May 21, 2024**

Chair Pavliga, Vice Chair White, Ranking Member Brewer, and members of the House Behavioral Health Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to provide proponent testimony on HCR16, recognizing the importance of perinatal mental health. My name is Tonya Fulwider, and I serve as the Executive Director of Mental Health America of Ohio.

The perinatal period, from pregnancy to the first year postpartum, is a monumental life-transition period that can result in anxiety and stress for many mothers and families. For most, mood disturbances are short-lived; however, about 20% of women and birthing folks develop a diagnosable mental health condition. Postpartum psychosis (PPP) affects 1-2 per 1000 births. It can develop rapidly and place the life of the mother and infant in danger related to its symptoms, which may include delusions, hallucinations, and severe mood symptoms.

In Ohio, the leading cause of pregnancy-related death is mental health complications, including suicide and overdose.

Because of the significant negative impact of perinatal depression, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends that all birthing persons be screened for detection of perinatal depression during pregnancy and early postpartum. However, healthcare providers fail to ask 1 in 5 prenatal patients and 1 in 8 postpartum patients about depression, leaving many individuals unscreened, mental health conditions undetected and untreated. These undiagnosed and untreated disorders are a silent health crisis, deserving recognition and action to save lives and improve the health and well-being of mothers, babies, fathers, families, and our communities.

I am excited to share the work of the Ohio Perinatal Mental Health Task Force, a statewide coalition of individuals and organizations dedicated to advancing access to care and treatment. We can position Ohio as a national leader in perinatal mental health through the task force. We have created the Perinatal Mental Health Policy Agenda, which encompasses strategies to foster collaboration, reduce stigma, improve screening practices, optimize data utilization, elevate the quality of care, bolster workforce development, and enact essential legislative measures. We are working together to equip Ohio to drive substantive change to support improved maternal and child outcomes in our state. This resolution is a first step toward that.

I also want to share the work of my organization, Mental Health America of Ohio, and why this work is so important to me. MHAOhio has been serving Ohioans living with mental health conditions for 68 years. Our POEM Program (*Perinatal Outreach and Encouragement for Moms*) is Ohio's leading source for maternal mental health access to care and support. POEM was founded by two other mothers, along with me. We experienced perinatal depression and anxiety ourselves, and we couldn't find the help that we needed. We started POEM as a small nonprofit organization focused on helping moms get quality care and peer support, and our organization was acquired by MHAOhio in 2013. POEM is a proven program that has received two national awards for innovation in care. ***POEM is the only program of its kind and one of the largest and longest-running peer-led maternal mental health programs in the U.S.*** Programs like POEM are critical for improved outcomes, and we hope to continue to expand this program.

Before I conclude, I want to thank Representatives Somani and Ray for their leadership on this important resolution. This will touch the lives of many moms and birthing people for years to come.

Thank you again for allowing me to provide testimony on HCR16. I am happy to take any questions you may have at this time.

Tonya Fulwider
Executive Director
Mental Health America of Ohio