



**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 Raquel Williams and I serve as POEM Education Manager of Mental Health America of Ohio. My journey with Mental Health America of Ohio began when I connected with the POEM Program for peer support during my own pregnancy. POEM provided me with the space to show up authentically, allowing me to foster meaningful relationships and receive communal care while navigating perinatal depression and anxiety.

As Tonya mentioned, Perinatal Outreach and Encouragement for Moms, or as we call it, POEM, is a proven program that connects and supports pregnant and parenting people with treatment services, increases coping skills, decreases symptoms of depression and anxiety, and improves health outcomes for moms and their babies. Within POEM, we also have Rise, which offers all POEM services exclusively for and by Black moms and birthing persons, including a providers of color network. We Rise for Black moms because we know that almost 50% of Black birthing persons experience perinatal mental health conditions. Compared to white women, Black women are twice as likely to experience perinatal mental health conditions but half as likely to receive care and support.

In my role, I coordinate and provide culturally responsive education around perinatal mental health, ensuring that all birthing persons and their care providers throughout the state are aware of the signs and symptoms and necessary components to quality care and recovery. It was this form of education that saved my own life during pregnancy and postpartum. Had my midwife or doula not discussed my mental health with me, prioritizing the person I was and am before I am a mom, I might have succumbed to the belief that the suffering I felt was normal, and that life was not worth living. The gentle reminder that I mattered, that my feelings mattered, encouraged me to move beyond shame and share those feelings with others, ultimately bridging connections that sustained me through the first two years of my daughter's life.

Through my work with POEM, I've come to learn that the holistic, person-centered care I received is often the exception and not the norm, especially for Black women. A goal of mine is to engage in collaborative efforts toward making mental health care more accessible to diverse and disenfranchised communities. It is my hope HCR16 will do just that. As we raise awareness around perinatal mental health, we must also do so with an inclusive and expansive lens.

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

Raquel Williams
Mental Health America of Ohio