

re: Proponent Testimony for HB7

Good morning, Chairperson Schmidt, Vice Chair Miller, Ranking Member Denson, and members of the Ohio House Families and Aging Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about House Bill 7 and how medical legal partnerships can improve health and developmental outcomes for mothers and babies. My name is Jen Behnfeldt, and I am a child advocate with the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children (MLPC) at Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Inc. (ABLE). We are a non-profit regional law firm that provides free legal assistance in civil matters to help individuals and groups living on low incomes in 32 counties in Western Ohio achieve self-reliance, equal justice, and economic opportunity.

I am here to provide supporting testimony for House Bill 7, and I commend Representatives White and Humphrey for recognizing the abundance of opportunities that medical legal partnerships provide to have a positive impact on the rate of infant and maternal mortality in Ohio and including a grant program for medical legal partnerships as part of House Bill 7. I would like to share some information about how medical legal partnerships can positively affect the infant and maternal mortality rate by addressing the social determinants of health that contribute to poor health outcomes for mothers and infants.

MLPs join the skills and expertise of healthcare providers and legal professionals to address the legal needs of patients that affect their health. For example, a pregnant woman living in substandard housing may be exposed to lead or other problematic housing conditions, which can lead to poor birth outcomes. Poor housing conditions can have a significant impact on the infant and maternal mortality rate in a variety of ways, including:

1. Exposure to environmental toxins: Lead-based paint, mold, or pests can expose pregnant women and infants to environmental toxins. Exposure to these toxins can lead to adverse health outcomes, including loss of pregnancy, premature birth, developmental delays, respiratory problems, and cognitive impairment.
2. Increased risk of infection: Poor housing conditions can also increase the risk of respiratory infections, which can be particularly dangerous for pregnant women and infants.
3. Stress and mental health issues: Living in poor housing conditions can be stressful and may contribute to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, which can affect the health of both mothers and infants.

An MLP can work to ensure that the woman's landlord takes appropriate steps to remedy the problem, which can reduce the risk of adverse birth outcomes.

MLPs can also help ensure that patients have access to necessary health care services and other public benefits which can have a significant impact on the infant and maternal mortality rate. For example, a pregnant woman may be eligible for Medicaid but may have difficulty navigating the complex application process. Other ways that access to public benefits can affect the infant and maternal mortality rate includes:

1. Access to prenatal care: Public benefits programs such as Medicaid provide pregnant women with access to prenatal care which is critical for monitoring the health of both the mother and the developing fetus. Prenatal care can identify and manage health conditions that could lead to poor birth outcomes, dangerous health conditions for the mother, and can also provide education and support to pregnant women.
2. Access to healthy food: The SNAP and WIC programs can provide pregnant women and new mothers with access to healthy food options, which can support healthy pregnancies and ensure that infants receive adequate and healthy nutrition during the critical first years of life.
3. Access to healthcare services: Public benefits programs can provide access to healthcare services, including well-child visits, immunizations, and treatment for illnesses and injuries. Access to healthcare services can help prevent and manage health conditions that could lead to poor birth outcomes or infant mortality.
4. Reduced financial stress: Public benefits programs can reduce financial stress for pregnant women and new mothers, which can improve their mental health and overall well-being. Financial stress can contribute to mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety which can negatively affect both maternal and infant health.

Public benefits programs play an important role in reducing the infant and maternal mortality rate, and an MLP can provide legal assistance to ensure that the woman receives the benefits to which she is entitled, which can improve her access to healthcare services.

Although there are many additional examples and much more detail than I have time to share with you today, the examples I have shared provide a broad overview of the ways that MLPs can improve health outcomes for both mothers and infants by working together with intentionality to address the social determinants of health. And, overall, MLPs can play an important role in improving the infant and maternal mortality rate by addressing the social determinants of health that contribute to poor outcomes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.