

Pregnancy peril

NY is struggling to reduce maternal mortality. How doulas could help.

David Robinson New York State Team | USA TODAY NETWORK

New York's maternal mortality rate should have dropped drastically between 2019 and the end of this year, but pandemic-era complications turned that lofty goal into an impossible dream, USA TODAY Network has learned. • Despite efforts to improve maternal mortality rates, they've barely budged the past few years — as some mothers died due to COVID-19 while medical worker shortages and financial upheaval plagued hospital systems. • Before COVID-19 hit in 2020, state health officials aimed to reduce the maternal mortality rate by 22% to 16 deaths per 100,000 live births by the end of 2024, according to a key state plan launched in 2019.

Instead, New York's rate was about 22 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births from 2018 to 2022, ranking 17th nationally, the most recent federal data show, and state health officials conceded they will miss the pre-pandemic goal of bringing that level down much further by the end of 2024.

"We had a break in the momentum, but we're not allowing the momentum to dissipate," state Family Health Director Kirsten Siegenthaler said recently in an exclusive interview with USA TODAY Network.

That same pre-pandemic plan also pushed to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in maternal mortality by 34%. Missing that goal would mean, in part, Black women remain nearly five times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women.

At the same time, doulas, or individuals who guide and support birth, told USA TODAY Network that efforts to grow their role in saving the lives of more mothers — in particular those of color — have struggled amid delays in making long-overdue Medicaid coverage changes and frustration with

the government program's reimbursement rates for doula care.

Still, Siegenthaler asserted New York had to fight hard to hold its maternal death rate relatively steady since 2020, while many other states suffered through drastic spikes of more than 50%.

How NY's maternal death rate compares to other states'

Overall, New York's national ranking of 17 has improved dramatically from a low point of 46th in 2010.

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"We all have the same goal, to have a healthy mom and baby."

Breonna Orum Rochester doula

This story was produced through the New York & Michigan Solutions Journalism Collaborative, a partnership of news organizations and universities dedicated to rigorous and compelling reporting about successful responses to social problems. The group is supported by the Solutions Journalism Network. The collaborative's first series, Invisible Army: Caregivers on the Front Lines, focuses on potential solutions to challenges facing caregivers of older adults.



Breonna Orum is a doula in Rochester, seeking to fill a growing need in supporting women in childbirth and other medical and family crises.

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