



## **HEALTHY BABIES ARE EVERYONES' BUSINESS**

### **Saving our Babies and Leaving Our Children a Better World through Cultural Competent Maternity Health Care.**

ICTC agrees that health care is a basic human right that should be afforded to all, with no exceptions. Black midwives and healers have a solid history of providing maternity services to the indigent and the wealthy alike, with an emphasis on improving community health. Through our collective efforts we can mend the US health care system. To that end, I am pleased on behalf of the International Center for Traditional Childbearing to endorse President Obama's plan for health care reform in the United States of America.

### **Organizational Profile**

The International Center for Traditional Childbearing (ICTC) is a Black infant mortality prevention, breastfeeding promotion and midwife training not-for-profit organization. The ICTC mission is to increase the number of Black midwives, doulas, and healers to empower families, in order to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Established in 1991 and headquartered in Portland, Oregon we have members and chapters in seventeen US states and internationally, including Ghana, Haiti, Japan, Nigeria, Canada and Columbia, South America.

ICTC employs the spiritual and traditional values of midwifery based on the Biblical story (King James Version) in Genesis, where the Egyptian midwives were part of health care reform. They refused to participate in medical exclusion. They believed every mother had the right to birth a healthy and viable infant regardless of her background. And that every father should be respected in his role in shaping the health of his infant through participation and education.

ICTC has an established history of providing national training to close the infant and maternal mortality gap since 1991 in communities of color, by providing volunteer prenatal and postpartum services; and promoting the use of midwives as an evidenced based solution to healthy families and healthy babies. Through education, training, conferences, and legislation, ICTC promotes the legacy and contributions made by Black midwives to the America's health care system and recruits young women of color to be educated as midwives to improve birth outcomes in the U.S.A.

ICTC recommends that the Midwifery Model of Care be recognized and incorporated at the federal level to protect the rights of women to access the services of midwives, as part of the New Obama- Biden Health Care Reform Act. The Midwives Model of Care is based on the fact that pregnancy and birth are normal life processes.

ICTC is the only national organization that represents the needs of Black midwives, promotes midwifery in the Black community, recruits Black women to become midwives, and challenges systemic racism by building bridges with diverse organizations. ICTC educates the public about the causes of infant mortality in the Black community and provides solutions. ICTC hosts the Annual Black Midwives and Healers Conference, which brings midwives together to strategize the improvement of birth outcomes in their communities and increase cultural sensitivity in maternity health care. ICTC created [www.ictcmidwives.org](http://www.ictcmidwives.org) which is the only internet site that promotes the legacy and contributions of Black midwives in America's health care system. As a professional organization of Black midwives, doulas and maternity care professionals, we support President Obama's commitment to "Leaving Our Children a Better World" by reducing maternal and infant mortality in America and empowering individuals to make a difference by supporting and training more midwives, doulas and healers.

As a social justice organization ICTC supports health care reform that includes cultural sensitivity in maternity care, primary care, infant and maternal mortality reduction, and improved maternity care in prisons. We support health care reform that recognizes that social determinates effect the health outcome of its citizens. Maternal and infant mortality is the result of many social determinants and the solution is comprehensive; however, should include ending the sentencing of adolescents as adults and eliminating systemic racism that increases prematurity and low-birth weight babies in the Black community.

### **The Problem**

The infant mortality rate in the United States remains obscene compared to other industrialized nations. The U.S ranks 41<sup>st</sup> in maternal and infant mortality with African American babies suffering the highest infant mortality rate of any race. Although the infant mortality rate for all races has decreased over the past two decades, the United States still has one of the highest rates among developed nations. In this country, the infant mortality rate for black babies is 13.5 per 1,000 live births, compared with roughly 5.7 for whites and Hispanics, according to statistics from the Center for Disease Control (CDC).

According to the United Nations Statistics Division, Population and Vital Statistics Report, the rate of infant deaths per thousand in El Salvador is 10.5 and according to the Michigan Department of Community Health, the rate of infant deaths for the city of Detroit is 15.9 per thousand in 2005.

One of the leading causes of higher infant mortality is premature birth (birth before 37-weeks gestation). Premature births contribute substantially to racial and ethnic health disparities in infant mortality. It is also very expensive in human capital and dollars. While preterm births account for 12 percent of births in the United States, estimates show that hospital charges alone for premature/low-birth weight babies reached \$13.6 billion in 2001, accounting for one-half of

hospital charges for all newborns. In addition, preterm babies are more likely to have long-term health problems. The March of Dimes gave the country a "D" overall on its prematurity report card; California received a "C," but 18 other states and the District of Columbia, where 15.9% of babies are born too early, failed entirely.

Evidenced based research has begun to explore the relationship between racism induced stress and high Black infant mortality. The PBS documentary, "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick" explores the disparity in infant mortality rates and other ways in which racial and social inequality may affect health care.

## **The Solutions**

Increasing the number of midwives of color and health care providers that are culturally competent must be included in the New Obama- Biden Health Care Reform Act.

Women who receive midwifery care have better birth outcomes. Midwives provide consistent nutritional information, provide longer relevant visits, include the family, offer advocacy and referral and actively promote breastfeeding with follow-up services. Midwives work at a grassroots level to deliver health care, in public health and in prevention to reduce the deaths of baby's and their mothers. Midwives understand that increased spending in health technology will not improve birth outcomes, but instead understand that a comprehensive health care plan can reduce the social determinants of higher infant and maternal deaths in America.

The most cost-effective birth hospitals charge from \$7,000 to \$16,000, depending on the type and complexity of the birth. The average birth-center fee is only \$1,600 because high-tech medical intervention is rarely applied and stays are shorter. The Midwives Model of Care is not just cheaper; decades of medical research show that it's better. Mother and baby are more likely to experience a normal, vaginal birth; less likely to experience trauma, such as extreme vaginal tearing or a surgical delivery; and more likely to breast feed. In other words, less is actually more. Midwives should be caring for the majority of pregnant women, and physicians should continue to handle high-risk cases, complications and emergencies. This is the division of labor, so to speak, that you find in the countries that spend less but get more.

The Obama Biden Health Care Reform Act must include pre-conception health. The Health Care Reform Act must include access to quality food, instead of spending excess money on prescription drugs which may be the result of lack of food. The Health Care Reform Act must address housing issues since homeless pregnant women are at higher risk for premature births, low birth weight babies and more mental health problems after the birth. Health Care reform must validate every human life as worth living by reducing racial profiling which has been medically proven to cause premature births, low birth weight, failure to thrive and mental depression in the postpartum period. In addition Black midwives recognize that the father is part of the equation for healthy birth outcomes and reduced maternal mortality. There needs to be more job opportunities and gun control to allow young Black men to live up to their potential by becoming active and engaged fathers, who can provide for their families.

**ICTC recommends the inclusion of the following in the New Obama-Biden Health Care Reform Act:**

1. The elimination of social determinants that create poor outcomes in the Black community, as a priority in The Health Care Reform Act.
2. Nutritional education, access to quality food and improved nutrition in all federally funded programs, including prisons.
3. Recognize maternity care as an essential part of women's health care and a priority area in health care reform discussions in the U.S.
4. Support the expansion and equitable payment of skilled primary maternity-care providers through federal recognition in all 50 states and US territories of those caregivers.
5. Increase the use of evidence-based maternity care practices and ensure that all women and their families have access to quality, affordable health care services and the providers of their choice.
6. Mandate that all HMO's private and public maternity centers that receive federal funding have 40% of their maternity staff be midwives of color.
7. Mandate that all health insurances pay for doula services for women at or below the federal poverty guidelines.
8. Incorporate federal campaigns that promote midwifery services.
9. Fund a national breastfeeding promotion campaign to support breastfeeding in order to reduce infant mortality and morbidity.
10. Incorporate the western European model of paid maternal and paternal leave for parents to care for their infant.
11. Ending the sentencing of adolescents as adults and eliminating systemic racism that increases prematurity and low-birth weight babies in the Black community; one of the leading causes for the higher infant mortality rate in this community.
12. Support and implement evidenced based programs that work for better birth outcomes, such as the Full Circle Doula Birth Companion™ training model and the JJ Way™.
13. To cap Malpractice Insurance, to allow midwives and physicians to provide quality maternity care.

Through the collaborative efforts of midwives, maternal and child health care providers and the health consumer, we can leave a better world for our children. Let's start by bringing these children into the world as healthy babies.

ICTC urges the Obama Biden Health Care Reform Act to strengthen the presence of midwives who can help reduce infant mortality and give the US a better report card for its maternal and child health outcomes. Midwives have always been an essential part of the American fabric for better health care for all and they need to be in the fore-front of maternal and child health to improve the birth outcomes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shafia M. Monroe". The signature is written in black ink and includes a decorative flourish at the end.

Shafia M. Monroe, Certified Midwife  
President and Founder