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**UAMS Launches Toolkit to Support
Doula Integration in Hospitals**

LITTLE ROCK — The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) Institute for Community Health Innovation recently launched the Advancing Doulas and Perinatal Teams (ADAPT) Toolkit, an innovative resource designed to improve maternal health by strengthening collaboration between doulas and clinical care teams.

Doulas are trained birth coaches who provide continuous emotional support, advocate for and aid informed decision-making during labor and delivery, assist with breastfeeding initiation and support, promote positive maternal mental health, and advocate for culturally sensitive care in clinical and nonclinical settings. The use of doulas has been strongly advocated by the institute and other partners to improve maternal and infant mortality rates across the state. Last year, the state approved measures paving the way for doula services in Arkansas to be reimbursable by Medicaid.

“Doulas engage families early in pregnancy and support them through postpartum, bringing cultural insight, emotional support, and trusted relationships into clinical settings that can feel overwhelming,” said Hannah McHardy, senior director of programs at the institute. “Their integration with medical teams creates a continuity of care that drives better outcomes.”

The institute is piloting its toolkit with Mercy Hospital in Northwest Arkansas and has plans to expand the toolkit to other hospitals throughout the state. The comprehensive toolkit provides proven models and tools to integrate doulas into care teams, improving both patient and provider experiences.

Since launching the toolkit earlier this year, 45 clinical staff at Mercy have been trained in doula integration, and the hospital has seen a 47% increase in understanding of doula scope of practice among staff.

“At Mercy, improving maternal and infant outcomes is a shared responsibility, and that means bringing every effective partner to the table,” said Whitney Tolbert, vice president

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of patient services at Mercy Hospital Northwest Arkansas. “Integrating doulas into our care teams is about strengthening coordination, trust, and support for mothers throughout pregnancy, birth and postpartum. Doulas are evidence-based partners that can complement the clinical team, help families navigate care with confidence, and improve the overall experience for both patients and providers.”

In a 2024 study by the UAMS Institute for Community Health Innovation, providers responded overwhelmingly that doulas benefit the patient; however, very few said doulas were integrated well into hospital teams.

“I love to work with doulas because I know the value to the families they serve,” said one provider. “There is often a reason a patient has brought a doula, ranging from personal choice to fear of the hospital environment. Appropriate relationships and shared understanding can bring about a collaborative birth experience.”

Of the providers surveyed, 86.7% reported they believed doulas improve patient experiences during pregnancy and childbirth. Only 13.3% said they believe doulas are trained adequately, and only 1.2% said they’re integrated well into hospital systems.

“Providers need to be reassured that we are in no way trying to step into their role,” said one doula. “Instead, we are there to help families understand when and why they need to be reaching out for further care with their OB-GYN as well as other providers to optimize their experience and create the best outcomes for everyone.”

Last year, the institute enrolled more than 50 individuals into its comprehensive doula training program, a program facilitated in partnership with Birthing Beyond, LLC, and Ujima Maternity Network. This year, the institute is training an additional 25 doulas across the state with support from the Arkansas Office of Skills Development.

“When care teams understand doulas’ training and scope of practice, they recognize them as valuable complementary partners,” McHardy said. “Both medical staff and patients consistently express gratitude for the additional support that doulas provide.”

The institute’s Doula Expansion Initiative is part of UAMS’ efforts to improve maternal and child health outcomes across Arkansas. The institute also offers group prenatal care, case management, care coordination and other services in select regions of the state. To learn more about the institute’s services, visit communityhealth.uams.edu.

UAMS is the state’s only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and eight institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute, Institute for Digital Health & Innovation and the Institute for Community Health Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS’ clinical

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