

# A bright future for maternal health despite mortality rates

For those of us in maternal and infant care, we stand at a crossroads. On one hand, we are in the midst of perhaps the most robust national conversation around maternal care, related health inequities, and expanded access to postpartum care that we have ever had. Yet, while the dialogue is flowing faster than ever, we are falling further behind in many telling measurements. Our maternal mortality rate, notably the worst of all developed nations, rose a staggering 40% year over year from 2020 into 2021.

Tori Bowie's tragic death is a current high-profile example of this current paradox. A gold-medal Olympian and once the fastest woman in the world, she was found dead at 32, alone in her Orlando home. Having gone into labor early, officials believed she experienced complications from respiratory distress and eclampsia — but this is only part of the story. Her friend and manager told press that Bowie was mistrustful of the medical system and worked to avoid hospital care: she would routinely skip prenatal appointments. Despite being financially stable and fully insured, cracks in the system failed her. Bowie was unable to receive the medical care needed to monitor her condition, track warning signs, and help ensure a viable, healthy pregnancy to full-term.

Tori Bowie is one of hundreds of women whose stories illustrate that the care models we have employed to date are all too often falling short. At this juncture, facing our maternity care crisis, redefining a more thoughtful, collaborative, and comprehensive maternity journey is perhaps the most impactful action we can take.

To help change the trajectory of maternal and infant health in America, we need to thoughtfully implement proactive and protective strategies. Instead of thoughts and prayers, we need to promote plans and policy changes. There are actions we can take, from emphasizing uninterrupted postpartum coverage to strategies that unite health plans and providers around a shared goal: whole person, managed care delivery that saves lives.

One bright spot is the strides that postpartum care has made over the last few years. As a resident of Southwest Florida, I was overjoyed last May, when news came in that Florida was approved for a



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12-month postpartum extension, a lifeline to much needed care and support for 52,000 new parents statewide.

Prior to this extension, nearly half (46.8%) of Florida's new mothers would have lost their insurance coverage only 60 days after childbirth. Now they have access to a full year of health care, which encompasses a period colloquially known as the "fourth trimester," an essential time for healing, recovery, and newborn bonding.

With coverage, these new mothers can now seek care to help monitor and manage postpartum symptoms, learn more about breastfeeding, initiate weight management if needed, and keep high blood pressure and other chronic conditions in check.

When it comes to caring for new mothers, these checkups are critical. Recent studies demonstrate that regular access to care and ongoing monitoring can help prevent up to 67% of pregnancy-related deaths. This is especially critical as studies show that more than half (53%) of all maternity-related fatalities occur within the 12 months following childbirth.

Our new moms are in crisis, and the time to act is now. What happened to Tori Bowie — what happens to hundreds of women each year — is largely preventable. With greater urgency than ever before, stakeholders across our great state and nationwide are joining forces to help improve the standard and quality of care for expecting women. By working together, policymakers, plans, and providers alike can advance new care pathways that address risk, problem solve, educate, and support — a continuum of care that provides high-quality care for every new mother and infant.

While we continue to have important work to do, implementing these inclusive strategies to change the narrative and broaden the scope of care brings great hope. We know what we have to do; now we must band together to approach care proactively and provide coverage that paves the way for a lifetime of health and well-being. A path that promotes healthier starts to support optimal health, wellness, and well-being throughout every stage of life.

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