



## Uma Gaddamanugu: Brody Scholars Summer Enrichment Project, Summer 2022

### ECU Volunteer Doula Program

This past year, my classmate and I were awarded the NC Albert Schweitzer Fellowship to establish a volunteer doula program at ECU Hospitals. Our goal is to facilitate access to culturally congruent, compassionate, continuous labor support, free of charge, to high-risk, vulnerable mothers in our community. This project can be broadly divided into two stages: first, recruiting and training volunteer doulas, and later, integrating doulas into the perinatal care team. The Brody Scholars Summer Enrichment Program grant was used to fund

the first stage of this project—recruitment and training of 20 ECU health professional students who started volunteering as doulas in September 2022.

### Background:

The United States continues to grapple with alarming maternal and infant mortality rates, with low-income women and women of color suffering from adverse birth outcomes at disproportionately high rates. Maternal and child health inequities are of particular concern in Pitt County, where infant mortality rates are significantly higher compared to state and national averages (1). Accordingly, the Pitt County Board of Health has selected infant mortality prevention as a top health priority, with a special focus on reducing infant mortality rates among low-income African American women.

A growing body of literature suggests that increased access to doula care, particularly in underserved communities, can reduce rates of C-sections, preterm births, and low birth weights and improve overall maternal satisfaction (2)(3)(4). Despite the tremendous potential for doulas to help combat maternal health disparities, doula services are not covered by Medicaid insurance in NC, and financial barriers often preclude families from hiring private doulas. Thus, our project will provide doula care to uninsured, Medicaid-insured, and adolescent birthing patients at ECU Health Women's Hospital, free of charge.

### Summer 2022: Recruitment and training

Despite the potential for doulas to improve birth outcomes, we found that there were only 2-3 community-based doulas in Greenville, NC. This gap is partially attributed to the cost of doula training and certification, which is prohibitively expensive for many community members. Thus, I am incredibly grateful for the Brody Foundation's support, which allowed us to develop an in-house training curriculum and provide doula training to 20 students at ECU, free of charge. We began the recruitment process in June and spent two weeks interviewing 72

applicants, all of whom are current ECU students. From this applicant pool, we selected 20 candidates who demonstrated profound interest in improving maternal health outcomes in our community. We spent the remainder of July creating the training curriculum and working with hospital administrators to finalize the program logistics.

We held our first doula training from September 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> at the Brody School of Medicine. Below is an overview of our schedule:

- September 9<sup>th</sup>: 4pm-9pm, introduction to childbirth education and tour of L&D unit
- September 10<sup>th</sup>: 10am-6pm, birth doula training (how to support patients in active labor, how to use massage and comfort measures, and how to advocate for patients)
- September 11<sup>th</sup>: 10am-2pm, introduction to breastfeeding and skin-to-skin



After months of planning and troubleshooting, it felt very rewarding to bring all our doulas together for a successful volunteer training weekend. Despite the long hours, they were incredibly engaged and eager to learn how to best support moms in our community. Two weeks after the volunteer training, we officially launched the volunteer doula program at ECU Health. Doulas started to sign up for twelve-hour volunteer shifts on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, and we will have at least one doula on the L&D floor for 25/31 days this month. We are overwhelmed by the positive feedback and enthusiasm for this program from our patients and health professionals on the L&D unit. I am extremely grateful to the Brody family for allowing us the opportunity to empower and support pregnant patients in eastern NC. It is truly a privilege to be a part of each patient's birth experience, and we are committed to sustaining and expanding this volunteer program as we strive to promote healthy birth outcomes in our community.

#### References:

- 1) "Pitt County Community Health Needs Assessment." 2019, doi:<https://www.pittcountync.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9719/Pitt-County-2019-CHNA-FINAL-August-2019>
- 2) Van Zandt SE, Edwards L, and Jordan ET. Lower epidural anesthesia use associated with labor support by student nurse doulas: Implications for intrapartal

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3) Mottl-Santiago J, Walker C, Ewan J, Vragovic O, Winder S, and Stubblefield P. A hospital-based doula program and childbirth outcomes in an urban, multicultural setting. *Matern Child Health J*. 2008;12:372-377. doi: 10.1007/s10995-007-0245-9.

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