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Getting Public Health Done: Shapiro Administration Launches Pilot Project to Improve Rural Health Care for Pennsylvania Mothers and Babies

The Shapiro Administration is investing more than $1.3 million to develop a model for improving care for mothers and babies in regions with limited access to pregnancy care.

Lock Haven, PA – Pennsylvania **Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Dr. Debra Bogen** joined UPMC and local organizations in Clinton County to launch a new pilot project to improve care for pregnant women and babies in rural communities at DOH's State Health Center in Lock Haven. The new pilot project follows months of collaborative discussions convened by the Shapiro Administration between rural health care stakeholders to come up with new ways to serve people in rural communities.

The Shapiro Administration's pilot project invests more than $1.3 million over two years and includes a partnership with UPMC of North Central Pennsylvania and other local health care providers. The goal of the pilot is to develop a model for providing a variety of physical, mental, emotional, and social health resources for women in regions with limited access to pre- and post-pregnancy care.

"The Shapiro Administration is funding and leading this pilot project because of our deep commitment to improving care for mothers and babies, not only in rural areas like Clinton County, but in every region where access to pregnancy care is limited," said **Health Secretary Dr. Debra Bogen**. "Our goal is simple: to develop a local network that provides easier access to basic pregnancy and post-partum care services that support mothers, babies and families. This pilot project is the latest effort in the Administration's ongoing work with health care and community leaders, to find commonsense solutions to support and sustain our rural health care system."

"For too many people in Pennsylvania in both rural and urban areas, access to maternal health care is an ongoing challenge. Hospital closures throughout the Commonwealth are leaving women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant with fewer

choices in health care providers and are forcing people to travel longer distances for their appointments and to deliver their baby," said **Department of Human Services Secretary Dr. Val Arkoosh**. "That is why this pilot program is so important, and DHS is proud to partner with the Department of Health, local health care providers, and health systems to make sure that women are getting high-quality care close to home and parents and their children have the best start as a healthy family."

The pilot project officially began this week with a community baby shower-themed open house at DOH's State Health Center (SHC) in Lock Haven. All women who are, or think they may be, pregnant can visit the SHC for basic prenatal services, such as health assessments and vital sign monitoring, pregnancy testing, prenatal vitamins, educational sessions, and medical or social service referrals as needed.

"I am hopeful that today's event will showcase an innovative model of care and inspire others to adopt similar approaches across the state," said **UPMC in North Central Pennsylvania President Patti Jackson-Gehris**. "We are grateful to be able to partner with the state in support of this pilot program. Today's event is just the beginning of a larger, ongoing dialogue aimed at developing sustainable solutions to ensure every woman has access to the care she deserves."

Clinton County was selected for this pilot due to the limited number of obstetric gynecology providers and long distance to the closest birthing facilities. DOH's community health nurses involved in the pilot have extensive experience in pregnancy and newborn care and the partnership with UPMC and other local organizations created a ripe environment to pilot a project that could be duplicated in other regions. Other local partners include the YMCA, WIC, and members from Safe Kids PA Lycoming County and Lycoming County Cribs for Kids who are committed to preventing injuries to children through education, collaboration, and advocacy.

The issues of improving maternal health outcomes for mothers and babies and access to health care in rural communities are often connected. That's why Governor Josh Shapiro has charged his Administration with finding solutions to both challenges. Last year he launched a rural health care working group made up of stakeholders at the state, private sector, health care leaders, and others across the state. Meanwhile, the Governor Shapiro's 2024-2025 bipartisan budget secured a $2.6 million increase for work to address and prevent maternal mortality, especially among Black mothers who are disproportionately affected.

The Administration has prioritized using data and recommendations from the 2024 Pennsylvania Maternal Mortality Review Committee (MMRC) report, along with feedback from a statewide survey, and regional listening sessions to develop a multi-agency Maternal Health Strategic Plan. The Administration has also championed the expanded use of doulas in the Medicaid program, as doulas have been found to ease the pregnancy and labor process and improve birth outcomes for both mother and child.

Maternal mortality is a concern nationally, with the rate of pregnancy-associated deaths on the rise in recent years. [In Pennsylvania in 2020, there were 83 pregnancy-associated deaths per 100,000 live births](); meaning 107 Pennsylvanians lost their lives during pregnancy, delivery, or within one year postpartum.

The Shapiro Administration also established a Division of Maternal Health Services within DOH to supports the administration of the MMRC, regional maternal health coalitions announced last year and other efforts to improve the health of mothers and babies.

Editor's Note: Video downloads and photos from the news conference are [available on PAcast.]()

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