

Senator Harris Introduces Maternal Health Bill to Address Racial Disparities in Childbirth

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U.S. Senator Kamala Harris recently introduced a bill to address racial disparities

On August 27, United States Senator Kamala Harris introduced the Maternal Care Access and Reducing Emergencies (CARE) Act, a bill aimed at reducing racial disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity. Harris felt it was important to introduce the bill, she said, because African American women are dying due to racial biases that “permeate our medical system”. Thirteen of the senator’s colleagues introduced the bill along with her, stating that Black women are at risk for pregnancy related deaths, three to four times more than their White counterparts (according to the Centers for Disease Control).

“Health equity for Black women can only happen if we recognize and address persistent biases in our health system,” said Harris in a statement released to the public.

“This bill is a step towards ensuring that all women have access to culturally competent, holistic care, and to address the implicit biases in our system.”

During a pregnancy, say medical experts from the CDC, a woman’s body goes through many changes that are normal, until they become complications.

“A pregnancy related death is defined as the death of a woman during pregnancy or within one year of the end of pregnancy from a pregnancy complication, a chain of events initiated by pregnancy or the aggravation of an unrelated condition by the physiologic effects of pregnancy,” they said.

Researchers haven’t been able to put a finger on the exact reason(s) for the disparities, however, a number of factors like poor access to pre and post natal care, inadequate medical treatment and chronic stress have been contributors. Last year, television judge Glenda Hatchett’s son filed a lawsuit against Cedars Sinai for the wrongful death of his wife Kiyra Dixon, after he said she had been severely neglected during her childbirth at the hospital. And, in February, athlete Serena Williams nearly died during the week after giving birth, from a pulmonary embolism.

Lucky for her, she said, she had a team of doctors and nurses at a hospital with state of the art equipment.

“They knew exactly how to handle this complicated turn of events. If it weren’t for their professional care, I wouldn’t be here today,” she told reporters at CNN.

However, Harris and her colleagues said there are plenty of other women who aren’t so lucky.

“Women of color continue to face disproportionate rates of maternal mortality and morbidity in this country,” said Jennifer Jacoby Altscher, Federal Policy Counsel, Center for Reproductive Rights.

“This bill aims to address these racial disparities head-on through the creation of programs that have proven to lead to better health for women of color.”

Legislators said that the CARE Act creates two new grant programs focused on reducing racial disparities in maternal health. One will be for implicit bias training to address judgement or behavior on the behalf of medical personnel based on implicit attitudes and stereotypes. The second will go towards the Pregnancy Medical Home Demonstration Project, which establishes a “demonstration project to assist up to 10 states with implementing and sustaining pregnancy medical home (PMH) programs to incentivize maternal health care providers to deliver integrated health care services to pregnant women and new mothers and reduce adverse maternal health outcomes, maternal deaths, and racial health disparities in maternal mortality and morbidity.”

“We applaud Senator Harris on putting forward this critical legislation and appreciate her commitment to ending racial disparities in maternal health care and outcomes,” said Elizabeth Gay, MPH, Co-Director of the Black Mamas Matter Alliance.

“Addressing racial discrimination and implicit bias is an important but often overlooked part of improving maternal health in the United States. We are grateful for Senator Harris’ brave leadership.”

Added Lisa Hollier, M.D., M.P.H, president of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), “We are proud to endorse Senator Harris’ legislation, the Maternal CARE Act. This bill gives young people entering the medical field access to implicit bias training, as well as establishes a pregnancy medical home demonstration program.

“We know that racial and ethnic disparities in women’s health – including in maternal mortality, an issue I have dedicated my ACOG presidency to addressing — cannot be reversed without addressing racial bias; both implicit and explicit. That’s why, in partnership with the Council on Patient Safety in Women’s Health Care and the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health, ACOG is actively involved in educating health care providers on implicit bias to improve women’s health. We look forward to working with Senator Harris to ensure this legislation becomes law, so we can work toward realizing an equitable health care system.”