



Association of Black Cardiologists, Inc.
Saving the Hearts and Minds of a Diverse America

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ABC MISSION:

To promote the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease, including stroke, in Blacks and other minorities and to achieve health equity for all through the elimination of disparities.

May 31, 2020

Ms. Nina Brown-Ashford, PhD
Acting Director
Office of Minority Health
Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services
7500 Security Boulevard
Baltimore, MD 21244

Re: Request for Information Regarding Maternal and Infant Health Care in Rural Communities

Dear Dr. Brown-Ashford:

On behalf of the Association of Black Cardiologists (ABC), we appreciate the opportunity to respond to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Office of Minority Health request for information (RFI) on rural maternal and infant health care in rural communities.

Founded in 1974, the ABC is a nonprofit organization with a national and international membership of 2,023 health professionals, professionals outside of the health care community who are members of the community (Community Health Advocates), corporate, and institutional members. The ABC is dedicated to eliminating disparities related to cardiovascular disease for all people of color and adheres to the vision that all people regardless of race, ethnicity or gender should benefit equally from reduction in the frequency, duration and impact of diseases of the heart and blood vessels.

CMS' request for information from stakeholders for the purpose of developing and refining programs and policies to improve access, quality, and outcomes for maternal and infant health in rural areas coincides with ABC's endeavors to address maternal health inequities in African Americans. As the RFI aptly points out, factors that lead to poorer maternal health outcomes in rural areas are often exacerbated for racial and ethnic minorities in those communities because of discrimination and/or feelings of stigmatization when accessing health care services, which can lead to health care avoidance and higher health risks. The rates of maternal mortality for black women in the United States is alarming, with deaths three to four times the rate of white women. The majority of these deaths are preventable.

On Saturday, June 13, the ABC will host a virtual Black Maternal Health Roundtable with cardiovascular and maternal health experts and activists from across the country. The roundtable is intended as the launching pad for a collaborative effort to:

- identify and promote an educational program on the importance of preconception counseling and postpartum warning signs and conditions;

- improve access to care for pregnant and postpartum Black women;
- improve surveillance of maternal mortality and morbidity;
- support multidisciplinary systems of care that serve pregnant and postpartum Black women; and
- support the implementation of research, authorship and/or publications focused on the diagnosis and management of maternal heart disease amid COVID-19, specifically targeting vulnerable racial and ethnic populations.

The ABC invites you or a representative from the Office of Minority Health to participate in this discussion which will take place 11:00 am to 1:00 pm ET.

The questions in the RFI on which CMS is seeking a response from stakeholders will serve as a valuable starting point for our roundtable discussion, and ABC would welcome an opportunity to share the outcomes of the discussion with you.

While the ABC is not prepared at this time to offer specific responses to the agency's questions, we offer the following observations:

- African American women experience higher rates of preventable cardiovascular diseases and chronic health conditions including diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. These conditions can influence both maternal and infant health outcomes. Preventive care, addressing these co-morbidities in the pre-conceptual and postpartum periods, can do much to end adverse perinatal outcomes among women of color.
- Many disorders manifest first in pregnancy and can impact a woman's health later in life. Such disorders include cardiovascular disease, which is now the leading cause of death in pregnant women and women in the postpartum period. Cardiologists in collaboration with obstetricians can help patients achieve and maintain long-term heart health.
- Women who experience pregnancy-related health problems – including preeclampsia and gestational diabetes – have a higher risk for developing heart disease in the years following childbirth. The same emphasis on glucose screening to detect gestational diabetes and mitigate long-term medical complications should be given to detecting and controlling hypertension, the most common medical disorder during pregnancy.
- Challenges such as transportation, housing, and other social determinants of health, as well as access to a diverse and culturally competent maternal health care workforce make it difficult for women needed services before, during and after pregnancy.
- Because significant disparities exist in genetic counseling and testing with Black women having the lowest rates of the latter, support for funding to allow women from rural and minority communities to receive consequential peri-natal genetic counseling and testing is necessary.

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the flexibilities afforded to physicians and other health care providers to utilize telemedicine have not only worked to mitigate the spread of the virus but has allowed providers to effectively reach rural communities and minorities in otherwise underserved health care communities. From this experience we have the opportunity to learn how to effectively use telemedicine to reach pregnant women in rural and medically underserved communities for early assessment and management to avoid adverse pregnancy outcomes. At the same time, we must take a cautious approach to telemedicine so we don't inadvertently exacerbate disparities within racial and ethnic populations due to inaccessibility of technology that makes telemedicine viable or who are not equipped to manage and triage their care.

Pregnancy is said to be a “window to future health” and is why there must be a continued emphasis and coordinated federal response to improve health care access, quality, and outcomes for women and infants in rural communities, as well as to reduce racial and ethnic health disparities within rural communities.

The ABC looks forward to engaging with the Office of Minority Health in its development and refinement of programs and policies that ensure rural families have access to high-quality health care that results in improved health outcomes. To participate in the ABC June 13 Black Maternal Health Roundtable or for more information, please contact ABC policy consultant Camille Bonta at cbonta@summithealthconsulting.com or (202) 320-3658.

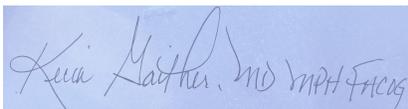
Sincerely,



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