

Enhancing Maternal Mental Health through Medicaid

Meaningful Strategies for Improving
Intervention and Support

The maternal mortality rate in the United States remains high, particularly when compared to other high-income nations. Despite recent efforts to reduce these numbers, the US still reports alarming statistics for parents within communities of color.

In 2022, the CDC reported that the maternal mortality rate for Black women is 49.5 per 100,000 live births, more than double the rate for white women.¹

According to Blue Cross Blue Shield, Latinx women have 22% more pregnancy complications than non-Hispanic whites,² and for women on Medicaid those rates are even higher.

As maternal deaths have increased steadily for several years, with rates the highest in the Black and Hispanic populations,³ there is a critical need to address racial and ethnic disparities in maternal health outcomes, especially within the Medicaid system.

Pregnancy, Medicaid, and Maternal Health: The Numbers

Not surprisingly, Medicaid plays a pivotal role in the maternal healthcare landscape. According to CMS, [41% of all births in the U.S in 2021 were paid for by Medicaid](#).⁴ More data highlights the impact that pregnant individuals have on healthcare systems:

- Despite the fact that only 2% of Medicaid members are pregnant at any given time, they account for 30% of total inpatient costs.
- 38% of Pay-for-Performance (P4P) measures focus on maternal and child health, yet these measures represent 46% of the overall value to health plans.
- Resources are low for maternal healthcare, with the US and Canada reporting the [lowest supply of OB-GYN physicians and midwives in the world](#) – 16 and 13 per thousand live births, respectively.⁵

Behavioral health remains an often-overlooked aspect of maternal care. Addressing this gap is essential, as mental health conditions including depression, anxiety and substance use disorders, are leading causes of pregnancy and post-partum related deaths in the US.

The Case for Focusing on Maternal Mental Health

A [2024 article in JAMA Psychiatry](#) reveals that maternal mortality rates in the US are two to three times greater than in other high-income countries.⁶ While many initiatives seek to address these problems overall, more attention needs to be focused on the connection between mental illness and maternal mortality. On May 14, 2024, the Biden-Harris administration [announced a new task force](#) to address what they call an “urgent public health crisis of maternal mental health and substance use issues.” Statistics support this categorization. Data gathered in the US from 2017 to 2019 showed that the leading underlying cause of these deaths were behavioral issues, leading the CDC to make the shocking observation that [4 out of 5 pregnancy-related deaths in the US are preventable](#).⁷

Notably, the same report found that nearly two-thirds of maternal deaths occur during the postpartum period, up to 42 days after birth, emphasizing the critical need for ongoing mental health support during this time.

Mental health challenges during pregnancy and the postpartum period are not abnormal. It’s estimated that at least one in five parents experience mental health challenges including mood and anxiety disorders, trauma-related illnesses, OCD, and postpartum depression and psychosis. Not surprisingly, pregnant people and new parents within under-served communities report more instances of mental illness, with Black and Native American individuals experiencing gravely disproportionate problems.

The intersection of mental health and social determinants of health (SDOH) further exacerbates these challenges, making it imperative to address maternal mental health as part of a holistic approach to maternal care.

Legislative Initiatives Supporting Maternal Mental Health

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on maternal mental health through various legislative initiatives. One of the most significant is the [American Rescue Plan \(ARP\) Act](#) of 2021, with provisions aimed at improving maternal health. Under the ARP, states were given the option to extend Medicaid postpartum coverage from 60 days to 12 months. This extension, made permanent by the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, is a critical policy for promoting maternal health equity.

As of August 2024, 47 states including [Washington D.C.](#) have extended coverage to 12 months. A [Maternal Mental Health Hotline](#) offering free, confidential support in both English and Spanish was also launched for people needing immediate help and resources.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act also introduced a new federal Task Force on Maternal Mental Health as part of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Advisory Committee for Women's Services. This task force seeks to address the public health crisis of maternal mental health and substance use issues, with a particular emphasis on mental health equity and trauma-informed practices.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is also paying close attention to maternal mental health. CMS introduced a [new Transforming Maternal Health \(TMaH\) Model](#), designed to focus exclusively on improving maternal health care for people enrolled in Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The model, which will run for 10 years, supports participating state Medicaid agencies (SMAs) in the development of a whole-person approach to pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum care that addresses the physical, mental health, and social needs experienced during pregnancy. The goal of the model is to reduce disparities in access and treatment and aims to improve outcomes and experiences for mothers and their newborns, while also reducing overall program expenditures.

CMS has also introduced a [new postpartum toolkit for state agencies](#), designed to increase access and quality, and promote equity in the delivery of postpartum care in Medicaid and CHIP programs.



The Role of Health Plans in Supporting Maternal Mental Health

With CMS and US legislation increasingly focusing on maternal mental health, it is essential for health plans to keep up and prioritize this issue as well. Our work at Icario has uncovered several proactive steps to help health plans better understand the needs of this population and develop strategies to engage these members more effectively.

Building Content and Communication Strategies

Today, many health plans have a plethora of resources for prospective and new parents, but that's not always enough. To build engagement and motivate healthy action in this population, these communications must be delivered in the right way, at the right time, and in channels that members are most likely to interact with. Smart, integrated follow-up actions and specialist support are also important parts of a successful outreach strategy. Icario has built successful engagement strategies for parent & baby that include:



Educational Mental Health Content

Health plans should incorporate educational-based content to address both clinical and non-clinical aspects of maternal mental health. By pairing clinical aspects like postpartum depression symptoms to look for with non-clinical drivers of maternal mental health, such as financial considerations, infant necessities (like car seat safety), and developmental milestones, health plans can provide more comprehensive support to address a variety of topics new parents may need support with.



Omnichannel Outreach

Mental health content must be accessible through multiple channels to reach diverse populations. Health plans can make this content available via omnichannel outreach, providing parents with the resources they need when they need them, in ways that promote engagement and action. Centralized access to on-demand content libraries and other ways to improve access to care providers and helpful resources can improve member experiences and overcome SDOH barriers.



Digital Enablement

Health plans can use digital enablement tools to foster engagement during the periods between in-person prenatal and postpartum visits. The ability for members to track progress of completed activities, track fetal development information, track symptoms, and offer reminders about what to discuss with healthcare providers regarding mental health, helps ensure that members stay engaged throughout pregnancy and postpartum.



Timely Follow-Up Actions

To further support parents, health plans can integrate follow-up actions at key moments of influence. For example, if a parent answers a screening or follow-up question with a "yes" to a mental health concern, they could be directed to live scheduling or a chat with a mental health specialist. Direct integration for scheduling or virtual care with related mental health specialists can ensure that parents receive timely and appropriate care.

Improving the Member Journey for New Parents and Parents-to-be

Icario has helped health plans utilize data analysis to create member profiles that provide a comprehensive view of the care journey. By identifying both functional and emotional aspects of the experience, we can tailor interventions to the unique needs of each parent. Risk stratification can also be used to target personalized interventions, particularly for parents with a history of mental health or behavioral health issues.

Leveraging the member journey to design engagement experiences enables health plans to take a holistic view of the continuum of care. By identifying key stages in the journey, health plans can effectively address unique experiences and ensure that mental health is a regular part of pre- and postnatal communications. This approach also allows for cohesive and streamlined communications, avoiding unnecessary duplication and ensuring that parents receive the support they need when it matters most.

Improving Maternal Mental Health Statistics: A Call to Action for Health Plans

Maternal mental health is a critical issue that is finally receiving the attention it deserves, particularly given the high maternal mortality rates in the United States. Legislative initiatives like the American Rescue Plan Act and CMS's Transforming Maternal Health Model are crucial first steps in extending postpartum coverage and providing more comprehensive care.

Now, health plans must take up the charge by learning more about these populations to develop strategies and promote meaningful engagement and healthier action. Icario has dedicated parent & baby programs to help address the unique needs of each parent that aim to reduce disparities and ultimately improve maternal and infant outcomes. Taking steps now is essential for health plans to create sustainable, equitable and effective care models that promote the long-term well-being of parents and babies.

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Our mission is to move people to do things that are good for them.

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