

I am sure you have heard the news stories of the increase in the number of C-sections. In the Bronx, more than 30% of women have a C-section -- that's almost one out of three women who will have her stomach opened up to deliver the baby. Once you have a C-section, your ability to have a vaginal birth often ends. You no longer really have a choice to have your baby unless you have another C-section.

One way to cut down on the number of C-sections would be to increase the use of midwives. If given the choice, many pregnant women would prefer the personalized care of midwives, who often make home visits for prenatal care. But there is little access to midwife care in New York City, especially since the closure of the birthing centers at Bellevue and St. Vincent's. In the Bronx, the only freestanding birthing center which has midwives on its staff is the Women's Health and Birthing Pavilion in Morris Heights Health Center. But the number of women it can serve is very limited. There are midwives working at various hospitals in the Bronx; North Central was the first hospital in the borough to use them; yet many only provide prenatal care and do not deliver babies.

Another way I have read about to reduce C-sections would be to have doulas available for women while they are in labor. These are people who are trained to provide support during the many hours of labor. They hold your hand, encourage you to push and are there for you during one of the most difficult times. They are also there to help you in the first weeks after the baby is born. To my knowledge, no hospital or clinic in the Bronx uses doulas.

In closing, I come before you both as the representative of The Bronx Health Link and as one of 20,000 Bronx women who want you to hear their voice. We have a few recommendations to help women during their pregnancy and postpartum period with the supportive services they need and to empower them to make informed choices:

We recommend that the New York City Council finds ways to:

- Support public campaigns that educate pregnant women about the risks of Cesarean sections. It would be great for women to hear commercials and see posters in the community about what happens when you get a c-section. A C-section is a serious operation and we should know what will happen, what the long term consequences are, and then have the choice to make a decision based on facts and not fear, pain or a doctor telling us it's the best thing to do when we are in the middle of labor pains.
- Provide help to people who do not have access to computers or the Web to access information on the C-section rates of city hospitals and other information about C-sections. I know that there is information on the Web about C-sections, but if you don't have a computer in your home, you won't be able to look at and print it and discuss it with other women, your family and the doctors where you get care.
- Give pregnant women a booklet, a flyer, a brochure with this information – so we can take it home and read it. We will never be empowered to ask questions and say no unless we have the information to fight our own battles.

As I mentioned before, North Central has nurse-midwives, and there should be funding for other HHC facilities to include or expand the services of nurse-midwives. I would add doulas to this as well -- both of these are caregivers who can provide supportive services, including home visits, to women during pregnancy, delivery, and the postpartum period.

Finally, I am here before you, seven months pregnant, because the Bronx Health Link believes that my voice and the opinions of the other women in the CAG have value, they give us a chance to discuss the things we feel are important to us. I would ask that hospitals and other health organizations make a commitment to give women an active role in how programs are created for us. Services and programs should be for us, about us, and include us in all decisions. One more suggestion: I have participated in focus groups and think that research should involve women like us from the community. If you want to know what's wrong, ask us and we will tell you. We will work with you to fix the problem.

I end by thanking you and asking that you help me and the other women who want more birthing options and more power about how we have babies than we have now. Someday, when my daughter is grown and having children of her own, I want her to know that when I was pregnant with her, I spoke out about what's going on now, so that she could have the choices I did not.

Thank you for your time and attention.

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