



Testimony for the February 24th New York State Senate- State of Maternal Health: An Examination of Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Rates in New York State on behalf of the NYU Grossman School of Medicine

I am Natasha Williams, an Associate Professor at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine, within the Institute for Excellence in Health Equity. Since 2021, my colleagues and I have been awarded funding from the prestigious National Institutes of Health to address adverse maternal health outcomes. These outcomes place a significant burden on communities of color, particularly Black women.

Recent data indicates that, for the first time in decades, the nation's maternal mortality rate has declined. While this progress is commendable, it is critical to recognize the persistent disparities that remain. As a researcher, I urge you to support funding that will help translate these findings into actionable solutions. It is deeply concerning that these improvements have not extended to Black women and those affected by poverty. This trend is not new. Decades of research have consistently shown that Black women face significantly worse maternal health outcomes compared to any other group.

Addressing the maternal health crisis requires a thorough examination of its root causes. My colleagues and I are actively collaborating with community and faith-based organizations to gain a deeper understanding of these issues. In addition, we are rigorously analyzing data from the Maternal Mortality Review Committee to identify trends and key areas for intervention. The data is unequivocal—Black women continue to experience disproportionately high maternal mortality rates, exceeding those of other industrialized nations. These disparities have profound and far-reaching effects on entire communities. It is imperative that our elected officials translate these findings into concrete policy actions and take decisive action by investing in sustainable maternal health solutions. The disparities in maternal health outcomes are not just statistics; they represent the lived experiences of countless women and families. We have the data, we understand the challenges, and now, we must act. Black mothers deserve equitable access to quality healthcare, to be treated with dignity and respect, and it is our collective responsibility to make that a reality.

One critical step we are taking is ensuring that evidence-based interventions reach the populations most in need. Our approach emphasizes deep community collaboration, prioritizing a bottom-up strategy rather than a top-down directive. Meaningful change requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach—one that integrates health systems, family and child services, substance use providers, clinicians, non-clinicians, academic researchers, and most importantly, mothers. Only through such a coordinated effort can we achieve sustainable and equitable improvements in maternal health outcomes.

The New York State Senate can pass resolutions on these two critical funding initiatives in the FY25 federal budget:



- **Allocate \$10 million to The National Maternal Mental Health Hotline** to provide free, confidential, 24/7 support for mothers facing mental health challenges.
- **Allocate \$24 million to the Screening and Treatment for Maternal Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Program** to expand access to essential care for vulnerable populations.

Or please consider allocating state funds to supplement or support maternal health initiatives.

Thank you for convening this critical public health hearing. We are at a pivotal moment, and I urge New York State to consider declaring a state of emergency to comprehensively address the maternal health crisis. This issue has far-reaching implications for mothers, families, and communities across our state, necessitating swift action to ensure that every mother receives the quality care she deserves.

In closing, I speak to you both as a researcher and as a mother. While I am not a clinician, I actively engage with the community, listen to the experiences of mothers and fathers, and work to understand the distinct challenges they face. There is growing frustration with listening sessions, town halls, task forces, and, yes, public hearings that do not result in meaningful action. We urge you to collaborate with those of us dedicated to this work and to adopt a comprehensive, systems-based approach—one that prioritizes community partnerships and ensures that critical services are accessible where they are needed most.

Mothers deserve better. We look forward to working with you to effect meaningful and lasting change.

Natasha Williams