

Overview

Brookings Health System serves nearly two dozen communities in eastern South Dakota. The rural health system includes the 49-bed Brookings Hospital; a 79-bed skilled nursing home, congregate living apartments for seniors, and several specialized clinics.

Brookings Health System is a non-profit, city-owned health system that offers the community a full range of inpatient, outpatient, surgery, home health, and extended care services.

In 2011, in response to community interest, Brookings Health System established South Dakota's first free doula program, staffed by volunteers. Doulas are women who provide continuous labor support during childbirth, working with mothers and their partners to provide emotional and physical assistance and using relaxation techniques to help with positioning and massage. One year later, Brookings added a free, volunteer postpartum doula program, becoming the first health system in the nation to do so.



Doulas who are not already licensed must attend training workshops, hosted by Brookings Health, that cover fundamentals such as background screening, immunization records and HIPAA requirements. New doulas also are mentored by more experienced doulas.

Impact

The doula program received high levels of patient satisfaction according to a survey by South Dakota State University. Expectant mothers stated they received added emotional support and closeness from their partners, who were often much more engaged when they had a clearer understanding of how they could assist in the birthing process.

Doulas also gave the program high marks for providing professional benefits, such as improved clinical skills, as well as the opportunity to build their own practices with private clients.

In addition, full-time staff at Brookings Health also were highly supportive of the doula program. They consider the birthing assistants to be team players, who are respectful of hospital policies and norms. In short, the doulas have truly become a part of the Brookings Health team.

Doula program administrators note it has had little impact on Brookings Health's already low C-section rate, which continues to hover in the 12% range. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the national C-section rate is close to 32%.

Lessons Learned

The first nine years of experience with the doula program has imparted several lessons for Brookings Health System:

- Some form of data collection should accompany the launch of any new program. It helps to measure



how the program is working and where it can be improved.

- Retaining doulas has been a challenge; the health system often recruited nursing students from the local university. However, by focusing on “motivators,” such as the desire to help other women and providing opportunities for personal and professional development, administrators found that older doula volunteers were often more committed and consistent in carrying out their duties.
- Introducing doula services during prenatal classes helped to get the word out, build the program, and helped doulas feel that they were meeting their goal of serving the community.
- By charging for doula training workshops (which were initially offered for free), Brookings Health found that the personal financial investment prompted volunteers to take their commitment more seriously, and that it raised the overall quality of the doulas that were recruited and retained.

Future Goals

Because many of its patients cannot afford a doula, Brookings Health System’s main goal is to find innovative ways to keep the service available to patients cost-free. This requires continued focus on supporting doulas and keeping them involved with their desire to help women.


“We created testimonial videos with moms who have used doulas to educate the community about the service as well as to reaffirm to the doulas that we value them,” said Julia Yoder, director of marketing and public relations at Brookings Health System.

While Brookings will not waver from its commitment to provide volunteer doulas for mothers and their partners who want the service, it also intends to offer recommendations from its pool of volunteers to women who can afford to hire private doula services. This approach also allows doulas to build their clientele beyond their volunteer efforts.

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