CLAS in Action: The Doula Training Scholarship

Community Birth and Doula Initiative (CBDI), Division of Pregnancy, Infancy, and Early Childhood, Bureau of Family Health and Nutrition

Summary

The Doula Training Scholarship demonstrates how the Community Birth and Doula Initiative (CBDI) incorporated the Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) standards into its program design and implementation. Guided by maternal health inequities data and co-designed with a steering committee of doulas, the scholarship supports doula training for individuals serving communities facing the greatest barriers to quality perinatal care. In its inaugural FY26 cycle, the program received 289 applications and awarded 91 scholarships to a cohort that is racially, socioeconomically, linguistically, and geographically diverse. By reducing barriers to workforce development for community-based birth workers, the program increases access to culturally and linguistically responsive perinatal care in communities experiencing the greatest maternal health inequities.

Using maternal health inequities data to inform scholarship design

The scholarship design was grounded in state data from An Assessment of Severe Maternal Morbidity in Massachusetts: 2011–2020 and the Advancing Health Equity in Massachusetts (AHEM) initiative. To address the geographic and socioeconomic disparities in maternal health outcomes, the scholarship prioritized applicants based in AHEM place-based investment areas or demonstrated a commitment to supporting populations disproportionately impacted by poor maternal health (i.e., families with a history of substance use disorder, people with special health needs, recent immigrants, families experiencing housing instability).

Community-driven design

Recognizing the importance of community expertise, CBDI recruited a steering committee of eight doulas representing research, public health, clinical care, doula training, and community-based practice. The committee itself reflected the diversity of the communities served, with more than half of members identifying as BIPOC. The committee shaped the scholarship's design, spread awareness, and reviewed applications. Based on the committee's feedback, CBDI expanded the scholarship beyond initial training to support the high demand for doulas' professional growth and developed a standardized review rubric to ensure all applications are reviewed consistently across reviewers and holistically based on applicants' experience, motivation, training goals, and plan for community impact.

Outreach and engagement for a diverse applicant pool

The scholarship was promoted through email, e-newsletter, social media (LinkedIn and Instagram), and cross-sharing by partners. CBDI relied heavily on community partners, including doula trainers and care professional programs, such as First Steps Together and Moms Do Care, to spread the word within communities and across healthcare professionals. By leveraging trusted messengers and existing community networks, CBDI expanded awareness of the scholarship beyond traditional public health channels and helped ensure that individuals from historically underrepresented communities were aware of and able to apply for the opportunity.

Outcomes

During the application window from January 16–February 20, 2026, CBDI received 289 applications. Applicants were extremely diverse in lived and professional experience:

- 75% of applicants were people of color, and applicants collectively spoke more than 15 languages
- 97% live, work, or plan to serve in at least one AHEM place-based investment area

CBDI awarded a total of 91 scholarships. The awardee cohort reflects the program's equity priorities:

- 78% are people of color. Among all awardees, 38% identify as Black or African American, 32% as Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 29% as White, 4% as Asian, and 2% as American Indian or Alaska Native.
- Two-thirds (66%) are multilingual. Awardees collectively speak more than 15 languages other than English, including Spanish (40%), Portuguese (14%), Haitian Creole (13%), Cape Verdean Creole, Twi, Arabic, Mandarin, Farsi, Swahili, Amharic, Yoruba, and Bengali.
- 46% are practicing doulas pursuing continuing training, and more than half bring prior experience in community-based health roles (community health worker, social worker, home visitor, lactation consultant, or other community-based care).

Lessons learned

- **Community partners are key to recruitment.** By building on DPH's outreach with community-based promotion, we can better connect with individuals and communities who need the opportunity the most. CBDI ensured key partners knew about the scholarship, notified them before and immediately at launch, and remained available to answer questions.
- **The steering committee was essential to building the scholarship and review process.** CBDI has collected the committee's feedback to improve the application and review process of the next cycle.

- **Language accessibility remains a gap.** Due to reviewer capacity, the application was offered in English only, which is a barrier for many doulas whose preferred language is not English. With AI use increasingly prominent in written submissions, CBDI is also reassessing how to review applications with an equity lens while keeping the application process accessible.

Scholarship Awardee Story: Tabitha's Journey in Becoming a Doula

Tabitha was referred by Moms Do Care to apply for the DPH Doula Training Scholarship after experiencing firsthand how powerful doula support can be. As a Moms Do Care graduate, a mother in recovery, and a parent who has navigated loss, DCF involvement, and caring for a child with complex health needs, she hopes to use doula training to support other mothers with similar lived experiences.

> "My doula helped me through the hardest part of my life during my daughter's open heart surgery journey. I am also a mother in recovery and have been over six years sober, and would love to be able to help others through their journey. I have been waiting for an opportunity like this [doula training scholarship] to come and am so excited to be able to help support mothers like me."
>
> – **Tabitha**