

Delta Health System | Greenville, Mississippi

A Comprehensive System of Maternal Care in Mississippi

The Landscape

Nestled in the heart of the Mississippi Delta, Delta Health System serves as a critical lifeline for Greenville, Washington County and the surrounding rural communities. The health system is the region's largest employer, acting as both a healthcare provider and an economic anchor. Local leaders describe the area's identity as rooted in "the Delta" — a close-knit community shaped by its agricultural heritage, resilience and deep sense of place.

The region faces significant health and socioeconomic challenges, where nearly 30% of the county's residents live in poverty. Chronic disease and other social drivers of health also affect nearly every aspect of daily life, and many residents rely on Medicare or Medicaid for health coverage.

Geographic isolation further complicates care delivery. Patients requiring specialty services often travel nearly two hours to Jackson, Miss., making Delta Health the primary source of care for a large rural region. Transportation barriers, limited internet access, intermittent phone service, food insecurity, housing instability and limited social support can make it difficult for patients to access care and follow treatment plans.

These challenges are particularly evident in maternal care. The Mississippi Delta experiences some of the state's poorest maternal health outcomes, reflecting longstanding disparities in access to care, transportation challenges, poverty and chronic disease. Women with high-risk pregnancies frequently require referrals to maternal-fetal medicine specialists in Jackson, adding burdens related to transportation, childcare, missed work and out-of-pocket costs. Many patients enter prenatal care later than recommended, while high rates of unplanned and teen pregnancy contribute to health risks that can span generations.

Like many rural hospitals, Delta Health also faces persistent workforce shortages, including shortages of nurses, anesthesiology providers and specialty physicians. Recruitment is further complicated by limited housing options and the challenges some clinicians experience when relocating to the rural



At a Glance

- **Health System:** Delta Health System
- **Hospital:** Delta Health — The Medical Center
- **Beds:** 17
- **Counties served:** 7
- **Annual births:** 359
- **Unique Factor:** Deep connection to "the Mississippi Delta"

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Delta. Financial pressures are further compounded by inadequate Medicaid reimbursement for labor and delivery services.

Against this backdrop, Delta Health views maintaining local access to maternal care as essential for improving outcomes for mothers and babies as well as strengthening the health and stability of the community.

"Maternal care cannot be evaluated solely as a profit-and-loss service line — it is a strategic and moral imperative," said Iris Stacker, CEO of Delta Health System. "It's foundational to community trust. It brings people into your health system throughout the life cycle."

Strengthening the Maternal Health Workforce

Delta Health has adopted a multifaceted workforce strategy that extends beyond recruitment. The organization is redesigning care teams, collaborating across health systems and investing in the next generation of providers.

Building a collaborative workforce

At the clinical level, Delta Health has redesigned care delivery to maximize the skills of every member of the maternal care team. Family nurse practitioners manage routine prenatal care through 35 weeks of pregnancy, allowing obstetricians to focus on higher-risk pregnancies and deliveries. This team-based approach expands access while ensuring patients receive care at the appropriate level of complexity.

Delta Health has also looked beyond its own organization to strengthen access across the Mississippi Delta. They formed a regional council with four neighboring hospitals to explore shared models for obstetric and specialty physician coverage. Rather than competing for scarce clinical resources, the hospitals are identifying opportunities to share providers and build regional centers of excellence in maternal and child health, cardiology and orthopedics.



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Through this collaborative model, specialists rotate among participating hospitals as needed. Pooling resources allows hospitals to recruit providers that would be difficult for one organization to sustain independently. The model also reduces the need for patients to travel long distances for specialty care.

Delta Health views this regional approach as an important evolution in rural healthcare — one that prioritizes collaboration and shared resources to better serve communities across the Delta.

A workforce for the future

Delta Health is investing in the next generation of rural physicians through its family medicine residency program. Leaders believe training clinicians in the Delta is one of the most effective ways to recruit and retain providers in a region where attracting physicians from outside the community remains difficult.

"Without training in the Delta, there is little realistic chance of building or sustaining a physician workforce for the Delta," said Delta Health Residency Director Brent Smith, M.D.

The program also partners with local high schools and colleges to encourage students to pursue healthcare careers, promoting what Dr. Smith describes as a

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"leave to train, return to serve" pathway that prepares future clinicians to come home to their communities.

Integrating doulas into the care team

Delta Health has also expanded its maternal care workforce by integrating doulas into the care team. Through a grant-funded partnership with the Women's Foundation of Mississippi, the health system launched a pilot program that provides trained, compensated doulas to support mothers throughout pregnancy, childbirth and the first year postpartum.

Doulas provide prenatal education, continuous labor support and postpartum follow-up, helping address emotional, educational and social needs that busy clinical teams may have limited time to address. Leaders emphasized that the successful integration of doulas required intentional culture change for the organization. Through ongoing education, collaboration and firsthand experience, clinicians increasingly recognized the value doulas bring to maternal care. Today, the care team views doulas as trusted colleagues who strengthen patient support, advocacy and person-centered care.



> "We don't want excuses for them to miss their appointment, so we're going to provide you with a ride right to the door."
>
> **Dianne Spears, community outreach specialist at Delta Health**

Supporting Mothers Beyond Clinical Care

Delta Health recognizes that improving maternal outcomes requires more than high-quality clinical care. With funding from the Health Resources and Services Administration through the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health, the health system's Rural Maternity and Obstetrics Management Strategies (RMOMS) program supports women from pregnancy through one year postpartum, addressing both medical needs and social barriers to accessing care. The program combines care coordination with practical supports such as transportation, nutrition assistance, behavioral health resources and referrals to community services. Participating mothers also receive remote patient monitoring devices, including blood pressure cuffs and glucometers with alert capabilities, that allow care teams to identify potential complications and intervene. The program has enrolled more than 220 mothers toward its goal of serving 350 women.

Transportation is one of the greatest barriers to care in the Mississippi Delta, particularly for women who require specialty services. Through RMOMs, Delta Health provides door-to-door transportation for prenatal visits, diagnostic testing, pharmacy needs and appointments with maternal-fetal medicine specialists who are two hours away in Jackson, Miss. Delta Health also offers a free van service to help all patients get to local clinics and hospital appointments.

By treating transportation as an essential component of maternal care, Delta Health helps ensure that where a woman lives does not determine whether she receives the care she needs. "We don't want excuses for them to miss their appointment, so we're going to provide you with a ride right to the door," said Dianne Spears, community outreach specialist at Delta Health.

Delta Health also supports families after delivery through Bundles of Hope, a maternal resource closet created after staff recognized that some parents were leaving the hospital without basic newborn supplies. Supported by donations from employees, community organizations and local residents, the program provides diapers, infant clothing, blankets, bottles, hygiene products and other essential items, helping families safely begin life with a new baby.

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Together, these efforts reflect Delta Health's commitment to meeting mothers where they are by removing barriers to care, strengthening connections to community resources and ensuring families have the support they need throughout pregnancy and postpartum.

The Next Chapter

Delta Health's work is far from complete. As the organization looks ahead, leaders remain focused on identifying and removing the barriers that continue to limit access to maternal care across the Mississippi Delta.

Delta Health plans to expand innovative models that bring care directly into the community, including a clinic and retail pharmacy in downtown Greenville to improve access to primary care and medications, as well as a maternal health mobile clinic that would extend prenatal care and testing into some of the Delta's most rural communities.

Through a partnership with the University of Mississippi Medical Center, Delta Health providers connect with neonatal experts via telehealth to provide higher levels of support and timely, specialized care when complications arise. Simultaneously, Delta Health is working towards reopening a state-of-the-art NICU, allowing high-risk mothers and newborns to receive specialized care closer to home.

Delta Health's continued investment in the future workforce includes plans to expand the Family Medicine Residency Program into additional communities across the region, recruit providers with ties to the Delta and explore innovative housing solutions to strengthen physician and specialist recruitment and retention.

Taken together, these efforts reflect Delta Health's broad approach to maternal care: Identify the obstacles that prevent women from receiving care and develop practical, community-centered solutions to overcome them.

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Explore the **Keeping Care Close to Home: A Rural Maternal Health Toolkit** and more case studies at **www.aha.org/ruralmaternal**

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