



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **More NSW women missing out on maternity care of choice as birth outcomes decline during pandemic**

A growing band of community organisations is calling on the New South Wales (NSW) Ministry of Health to provide women with expanded access to continuous antenatal care.

Just one in 10 women in NSW public hospitals has access to the same midwife during their pregnancy, birth and postpartum, with many women seeing more than 20 different care providers.

Demand for publicly funded homebirths grew by 312% during 2020, but only five out of 14 Local Health Districts in the state offer a homebirth program, which provides women with ongoing monitoring and support from a known midwife.

Meanwhile, the most recent NSW Mothers & Babies Report shows that demand for birth centres has doubled in the last five years, and more than half of women who chose to have their baby in a birth centre missed out.

A group of almost 50 community organisations, including Maternity Choices Australia, the Maternity Consumer Network and the Australian College of Midwives, has written to New South Wales Health and state ministers in the lead-up to the election demanding key revisions to the state's maternity services.

The call comes against the backdrop of a rise in stillbirths and caesareans in NSW during the first year of the pandemic, with the state's caesarean rate soaring to 37%, while one in three women in the state experienced birth trauma.

President of Maternity Choices Australia, Peta Tuck, said fragmented maternity services led to poorer physical and emotional outcomes for mothers and babies, particularly for First Nations women and their newborns.

'We've seen a rise in demand for access to publicly funded homebirths and birth centres primarily because of the higher level of personal care and support that is offered through these models as opposed to the hospital system where service delivery is fragmented and women are usually attended to by a stranger,' Ms Tuck said.

'Sadly, only a small proportion of women birthing in public hospitals can access ongoing personal care with a known midwife, and we're calling on the state government to expand access now.'

'Continuity of midwifery care means women and their babies are supported by a primary and backup midwife during the continuum of their journey, which means they're less likely to slip through the cracks.'

'There's a wealth of research locally and internationally that expanded access to continuity of care produces better outcomes for mother and baby, including a reduction in the incidence of low birth weight, preterm birth, stillbirth and neonatal death, as well as improved breastfeeding rates and mental health.'

The effects are more pronounced for First Nations communities, with data showing that fragmented maternity care results in a 50% rise in pre-term births.

Moreover, birth outcomes data from Sydney's Royal Women's Hospital Homebirth Program, which was launched in 2018 and is one of five publicly funded programs in the state, showed women birthing in the program had fewer interventions and more positive birth experiences.

'The evidence from studies from millions of homebirths is very clear that homebirth programs are safe, and the continuity of care they offer increases satisfaction,' Ms Tuck said.

'Continuity of midwifery care is also cost-effective.

'It would save the NSW government at least \$1000 per birth compared to all other models of care, so universal access equates to an almost half a billion-dollar saving annually.

Research shows that one in three women in Australia experience birth trauma, one in four develop post-natal depression, and up to one in five develop post-traumatic stress disorder from their birth.

'Studies have found that the trauma women experience during their birth stems mostly from care providers' words and actions so midwifery continuity of care is the primary means to prevent or drastically reduce trauma,' Ms Tuck said.

'It's time for the government to take action so that our women and babies no longer miss out on the care they deserve.'

Joining Maternity Choices Australia in efforts to lobby the NSW government for key election commitments are 45 organisations from a range of community sectors.

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