

# Targeting US maternal mortality: ACOG's recent strides and future action

How the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act of 2018, newly introduced ACOG-supported bills, and ACOG partnerships have and intend to make a difference in US rates of maternal mortality

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Real progress was achieved in 2018 in the effort to reduce the US maternal mortality rate, the highest of any developed nation and where women of color are 3 to 4 times more likely than others to die of child-birth-related causes. Importantly, the United States is the only nation other than Afghanistan and Sudan where the rate is rising.<sup>1</sup>

In May 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published a Vital Signs document focused on preventable maternal deaths.<sup>2</sup> It affirmed that about 60% of the 700 pregnancy-related deaths that occur annually in the United States are preventable, and it provided important information on when and why these deaths occur.

Among the CDC findings, about:

- one-third of deaths (31%) occurred **during pregnancy** (before delivery)
- one-third (36%) occurred **at delivery or in the week after**
- one-third (33%) occurred **1 week to 1 year postpartum**.

In addition, the CDC highlighted that:

- Heart disease and stroke caused more than 1 in 3 deaths (34%). Infections and severe bleeding were other leading causes of death.
- Black and American Indian/Alaska Native women were about 3 times as likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause as white women.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), under the leadership of President Lisa Hollier, MD, MPH (2018–2019), fully embraced the challenge and responsibility of meaningfully improving health care for every mom. In this article, I review some of the critical steps taken in 2018 and preview ACOG's continued commitment for 2019 and beyond.

## Efforts succeed: Bills are now laws of the land

ACOG and our partner organizations, including the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine and the March of Dimes, have long recognized the value of state-based maternal mortality review committees (MMRCs) in slowing and reversing the rate of maternal mortality. An MMRC brings together local experts to examine the causes of maternal deaths—not to find fault, but to find ways to prevent future deaths. With the right framework and support, MMRCs already are providing us with data and driving policy recommendations.

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**Supporting MMRCs in all states.** With this in mind, ACOG helped pass and push to enactment HR 1318, the Preventing Maternal Deaths Act of 2018 (Public Law No. 115-344), a bipartisan bill designed to help develop and

provide support for MMRCs in every state. The bill was introduced in the US House of Representatives by Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler (R-WA) and Rep. Diana DeGette (D-CO) and in the US Senate by Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and Sen. Shelley Moore Capito (R-WV). ACOG Fellow and US Rep. Michael Burgess, MD (R-TX), also was instrumental in the bill's success. The CDC is actively working toward implementation of this law, and grantees are expected to be announced by the end of September.

In addition, ACOG worked with Congress to secure \$50 million in federal funding to reduce maternal mortality, allocated thusly:

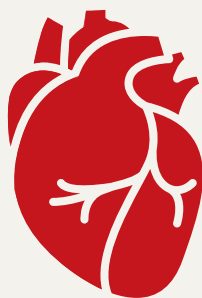
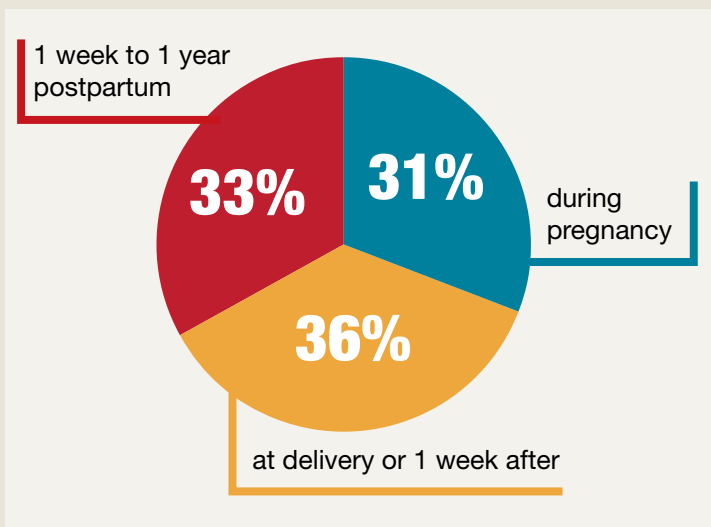
- \$12 million to support state MMRCs
- \$3 million to support the Alliance for Innovation on Maternal Health
- \$23 million for State Maternal Health Innovation Program grants
- \$12 million to address maternal mortality in the Healthy Start program.

As these federal congressional initiatives worked their way into law, the states actively supported MMRCs as well. As of this writing, only 3 states—North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming—have not yet developed an MMRC.<sup>3</sup>

**Filling the gaps in ObGyn care.** Another key ACOG-sponsored bill signed into law will help bring more ObGyns into shortage areas. Sponsored by Rep. Burgess, Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-CA), and Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA) and by Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), the Improving Access to Maternity Care Act (Public Law No. 115-320) requires the Department of Health and Human Services to identify maternity health professional target areas for use by the National Health Service Corps to bring ObGyns to where they are most needed.

Following up on that new law, ACOG currently is working closely with the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) on the unique challenges women in rural areas face in accessing maternity and other women's health care services. In June, Dr. Hollier represented ACOG at the Rural Maternal Health forum, which was

## US maternal deaths, 2011-2015<sup>2</sup>



Heart disease and stroke caused more than **1 in 3 deaths**



convened by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid and sponsored by ACOG, AAFP, and NRHA.<sup>4</sup> We are pursuing policies designed to increase the number of ObGyns and other physicians who choose to train in rural areas and increase the clinical use of telehealth to help connect rural physicians and patients with subspecialists in urban areas.

## Projects in the works

Congress is ready to do more. Already, 5 ACOG-supported bills have been introduced, including bills that extend women's Medicaid coverage to 12 months postpartum (consistent with coverage for babies), support state perinatal quality collaboratives, and more. This interest is augmented by the work of the recently formed congressional Black Maternal Health Caucus, focused on reducing racial disparities in health care. In July, ACOG joined 12 members of Congress in a caucus summit to partner with these important congressional allies.

ACOG is expanding support for these legislative efforts through our work with another important ally, the American Medical Association (AMA). ACOG's delegation to the 2019 Annual Meeting of the AMA House of Delegates in June scored important policy wins, including AMA support for Medicaid coverage for women 12 months postpartum and improving access to care in rural communities.

There is momentum on Capitol Hill to

take action on these important issues, and ACOG's priority is to ensure that any legislative package complements the important work many ObGyns are already doing to improve maternal health outcomes. ACOG has an important seat at the table and will continue to advocate each and every day for your practices and your patients as Congress deliberates legislative action.

## Your voice matters

Encourage your representatives in the House and the Senate to support ACOG-endorsed legislation and be sure they know the importance of ensuring access to women's health care in your community. Get involved in advocacy; start by visiting the ACOG advocacy web page ([www.acog.org/advocacy](http://www.acog.org/advocacy)). Also note that members of Congress are back in their home states during seasonal breaks and many hold town halls and constituent meetings. The health of moms and babies is always an important issue, and you are the expert.

ACOG's commitment to ensuring healthy moms and babies, and ensuring that our members can continue providing high-quality care, runs through everything we do.

## Acknowledgments

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## FAST TRACK

*ACOG's priority is to ensure that any legislative package complements the important work many ObGyns are already doing to improve maternal health outcomes*

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