

News From The States

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS TODAY

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By [Elisha Brown](#)



Experts say at-home nurse programs could help pregnant and postpartum Alaskans living in rural areas.
(Getty Images)

An analysis of Alaska’s maternal mortality rates discovered that more new mothers died from domestic violence or overdose causes than medical complications.

Between 2016 and 2022, more than [70%](#) of Alaskans who died within a year of childbirth had a history of intimate partner violence or substance use. Health employees and birth workers in the state are working to increase access to both providers and safety resources, [Alaska Beacon](#) reports.

“If you’ve been healthy enough to be pregnant, you shouldn’t be dying,” said Ness Verigin, who manages the Maternal and Child Death Review. “It’s a time when protection and safety

and health should be wrapped around a person. And the fact that violence is more common during that time is a serious problem.”

Providers often screen for domestic violence, and Verigin said a doctor’s office can serve as a safe space for survivors to share their experiences away from their abusers.

Jennifer Harlos, a nurse and a member of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, said domestic violence can also exacerbate pregnancy-related deaths.

“If you aren’t allowed to leave the house, then you’re not going to go to your appointment. And if you know that your partner is going to drink and hurt your children, then you’re not going to get admitted to the hospital,” Harlos said.

Pregnant people who have suffered domestic abuse are at higher risks of issues like preterm labor or abruption — when the placenta detaches from the womb due to abdominal trauma, high blood pressure or substance use — and intrauterine growth restriction brought on by stress, according to Harlos.

The stakes are especially high for rural Alaskans, and Native women, who make up the majority of pregnancy-associated deaths in the state, Harlos said.

Verigin said pregnant or postpartum people are possibly using drugs as a coping mechanism for enduring abuse. “It’s a way of numbing the pain and surviving,” they said.

Alaska’s maternal health experts say home nurse programs should be expanded. The Maternal Child and Death Review partners with an Alaska Native birth worker program for [culturally-congruent care](#) through an annual \$250,000 grant. A crowd-funded group of doulas and lactation consultants called Alaska Native Birth Workers Collective also provides free care to Indigenous families.

Abra Patkotak, co-creator of the collective, said most medical providers are not Alaska Natives and struggle to comprehend what families undergo just to get to a hospital. Patkotak and other birth workers help Native pregnant patients navigate medical spaces and work to keep them safe at home.

THE BEAT *States Newsroom coverage*

Montana abortion rights advocates launch ballot petition campaign



*Abortion could be on the ballot in Montana in 2024. Voters in the state rejected an anti-abortion constitutional amendment last year.
(Getty Images)*

Planned Parenthood Advocates of Montana submitted a ballot initiative last week that would protect personal decisions about pregnancy, including the right to abortion up to fetal viability. A 1999 state Supreme Court ruling solidified abortion rights based on privacy, but a constitutional amendment would make that protection explicit, [Daily Montanan](#) reports. “Courts wouldn’t have to interpret what the constitution might mean, because it would be spelled out in the constitution,” said Christopher Coburn, a Planned Parenthood spokesperson.

Montana’s Republican supermajority passed anti-abortion legislation that Gov. Greg Gianforte approved this spring, but the laws are temporarily blocked by the courts.

Montana voters rejected an anti-abortion measure legislators placed on the ballot last year. Citizen-led abortion initiatives have had success in several states since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. But Coburn said his group’s campaign isn’t following national trends. “Regardless of what’s happening in other states, Montanans deserve to have their rights to reproductive health care, including abortion, secured,” he said. To make the ballot, the petition must be reviewed by the attorney general’s office and receive signatures from at least 10% of registered voters.

Arkansas AG rejects abortion rights petition

The Arkansas attorney general rejected an abortion ballot petition on Tuesday, calling the language ambiguous. **The proposed constitutional amendment would guarantee abortion access up to 18 weeks of pregnancy with exceptions for rape, incest, fetal anomalies and to preserve a patient's health or life**, [Arkansas Advocate](#) reports.

Republican Attorney General **Tim Griffin** wrote an [opinion](#) to Steven Nichols, the Little Rock resident who submitted the proposal, explaining the decision. Griffin said the petition's language "aims to prevent any government action that regulates abortion itself." He questioned whether the proposal covered physical health or mental health, too. He also said the title was "tinged with partisan coloring" because the petition is related to abortion, not reproductive health care.

Arkansans for Limited Government, a ballot question committee that supports the abortion rights campaign, [said](#) it appreciated Griffin's review and will work with Nichols to revise the amendment. "We are committed to supporting a ballot proposal that is clear for Arkansas voters."

In Wyoming, abortion court battles loom as major clinic nears closure

Both sides of Wyoming's abortion debate are bracing for two significant court hearings which coincide with the closing of a Jackson clinic, [WyoFile](#) reports.

"It's going to be a tense week," said Right to Life Wyoming president Marti Halverson. The executive director of the state's Pro-Choice organization agreed. "Right now, the lawsuits are the critical component to everything," Sharon Breitweiser said. **Ahead of the two court dates, a judge is expected to decide whether expert witnesses and an amicus brief can be allowed in the lawsuit challenging the state's abortion bans, which are temporarily halted.** One is a near-total ban and the other restricts medication abortion.

A Dec. 12 hearing before the Wyoming Supreme Court will weigh **abortion opponents' requests to intervene in the lawsuit against the state's bans.** On Dec. 14, 9th District Court Judge Melissa Owens will hear arguments on why she should issue a **summary judgment for plaintiffs or defendants. Women and providers are urging Owens to declare the bans unconstitutional and permanently strike them down. State officials contend that the bans follow the Wyoming Constitution and should stay on the books.** Owens could deny both motions for a summary judgment and send the case to trial in April.

Meanwhile, Women's Health & Family Care in Jackson is set to close next month, leaving a Casper clinic as the state's sole provider of in-person abortions. The doctors affiliated with Health & Family Care will remain in the area, but it's unclear if they will provide abortions at the local hospital.

THE PULL *Commentary from Oklahoma*

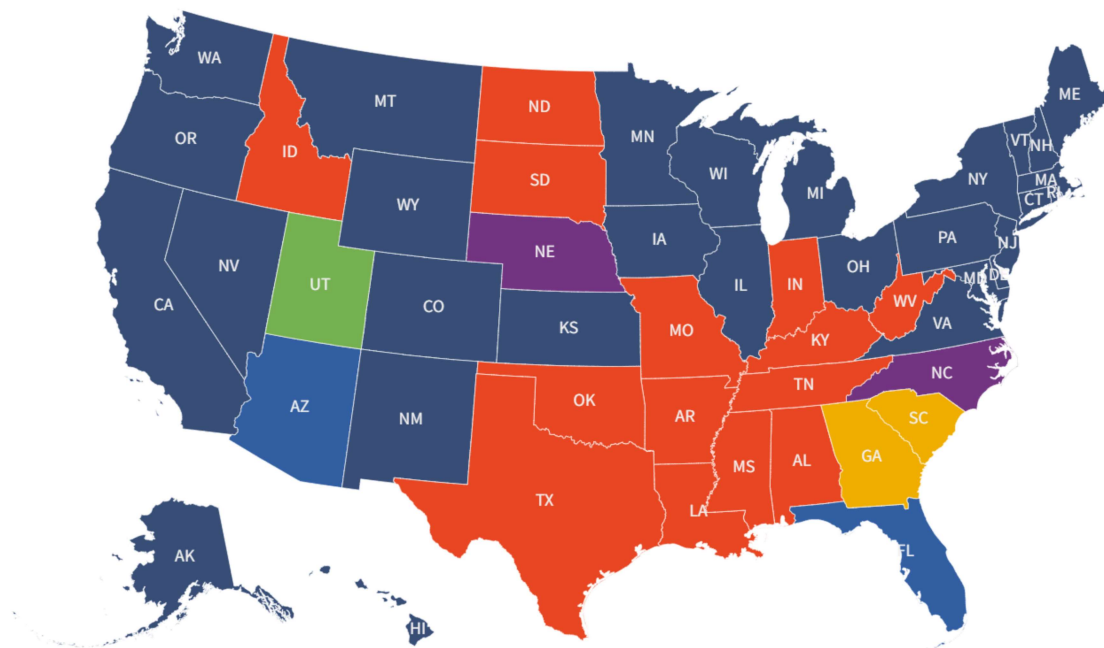
“Legislators can’t have it both ways. If they want to restrict access to health care and abortion, then they need to ensure Oklahomans have all the other tools available to safeguard their reproductive health — before decisions are made that can’t be undone.” —

Janelle Stecklein, editor, [Oklahoma Voice](#)

THE PULSE *Reproductive rights news across the country*

- A new report suggested that reforming Idaho’s Medicaid coverage could decrease the state’s rising maternal and infant mortality rates. ([Idaho Capital Journal](#))
- Overdose deaths among pregnant and postpartum people increased significantly between 2018 and 2021, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. ([Washington Post](#))
- Tulane University researchers found that people living in reproductive health deserts were more likely to give birth prematurely than those who live near providers. ([Verite](#))
- Divergent abortion policies are likely to be a point of contention during the upcoming debate between California Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom and Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis. ([KFF Health News](#))

STATE BY STATE *Abortion access in the U.S.*



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