BUSINESS

Some have called the South Side a birthing ‘desert.’ A nurse midwife is working to change that.



Jeanine Valrie Logan outside the site of the future Chicago South Side Birth Center on June 25, 2024. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)



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Jeanine Valrie Logan sat in traffic for nearly two hours while she was in labor with her third child.

Logan was determined to have her daughter at a birth center — a type of small facility focused on childbirth, often staffed by midwives. But there weren't any birth centers near her home in the south suburbs, so she traveled nearly 30 miles to Berwyn.

"I'm not an anomaly," Logan said, of the time it took her to get to the birth center. "People deserve to have that access in their own community."

Now, six years later, Logan is working to make that belief a reality. Logan, who is a certified nurse midwife, worked with lawmakers in recent years to expand the number of birth centers allowed in Illinois, and she is seeking permission from a state board to open a new birth center on the South Side of Chicago.



If approved, it would be the first birth center on the South Side — an area with a largely Black population that's faced challenges related to pregnancy and childbirth. Black women in Illinois are significantly more likely than white women to die from pregnancy-related conditions and suffer severe pregnancy or delivery complications. Several South Side hospitals have also closed their birthing units in recent years.

"There are not many options to give birth or even get prenatal care, so the Chicago (South Side) birth center is really going to fill a gap," said Michelle Adeniyi, director of Maternal and Child Health Collective Impact for the March of Dimes in Chicago, which has voiced support for the project. "We believe that all women, but especially women that are marginalized and already have lack of access to quality care on the South Side deserve that high quality and safe maternity care."

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It's a project that Logan, who said she's worked in childbirth for nearly two decades, has been focused on since 2020.

Logan had long thought it was odd that Illinois didn't have more birth centers. She gave birth to her first two daughters at home in 2010 and 2014, under the care of midwives, because there were no birth centers in the state at the time, she said.

"I knew what it would be like going to the hospital as a Black woman, so I chose to find a midwife to have a baby at home," Logan said, noting racial bias in health care can mean difficult experiences for Black women in



Gov. J.B. Pritzker talks about new maternal health initiatives at the future South Side Birth Center on Feb. 26, 2024, in Chicago. (Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune)

Illinois lawmakers passed a bill allowing birth centers in 2009, but the first one didn't open until years later. As a midwife, Logan felt called to action in 2020, when the death of George Floyd sparked unrest across the country and after multiple South Side hospitals closed their birthing units, in some cases to make room for more COVID-19 patients. Community hospitals across the state have been shuttering their OB units in recent years, often citing costs and low numbers of patients.

"Our options were not expanding on the South Side," Logan said. "They were getting smaller."

She worked with lawmakers who passed a bill in 2021 expanding the number of birth centers allowed in Illinois from 10 to 17 and allowing more centers to be run by entities other than hospitals or federally qualified health centers.

Logan got to work finding funding and supporters for the nonprofit birth center. So far, Logan said she has raised $1.9 million through grants and crowdsourcing, including $1.5 million committed by philanthropic organization Chicago Beyond, which has also been supporting Logan with salary and benefits as she's pursued the project.

Logan recently bought a former church building in the South Shore neighborhood to house the center. She plans for the center to include three rooms for giving birth, three rooms for prenatal visits, staff offices and space for families. The center would also offer prenatal and other health care as well as community classes on child birth, breastfeeding and other topics.



Jeanine Valrie Logan in the future Chicago South Side Birth Center on June 25, 2024. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)

The center would not offer epidurals or medications to induce deliveries, though it would have medication to help stop bleeding and it would have local anesthesia, such as for women who need stitches after childbirth.

Only women with low-risk pregnancies would be eligible to give birth at the center. If patients ran into trouble during childbirth and needed more medical intervention, Advocate Trinity Hospital has agreed to accept patient transfers from the center.

The idea behind the center is to treat pregnancy and childbirth as wellness states, rather than sick states in need of intense medical interventions, Logan said. She expects the center to be able to deliver about 225 babies in its first year.

The Chicago South Side Birth Center could open in 2026, if the project gains

Liz Dozier, founder and CEO of Chicago Beyond, called the decision to help Logan open the center a “no brainer,” given disparities in maternal health outcomes between Black and white women, as well as the state of obstetrics care on the South Side. Logan is now a leader in residence at Chicago Beyond.

“It just made absolute sense to think of this birth center being on the South Side of Chicago,” Dozier said. “You don’t have to look far, with what’s happened with hospitals and access to care on the South Side.”

Some have even referred to the South Side as a “birthing desert.” Since 2019, three South Side hospitals have closed their obstetrics units, including Jackson Park Hospital and Medical Center, St. Bernard Hospital and Health Care Center, and Insight Hospital and Medical Center Chicago (formerly called Mercy Hospital). That’s left just a few hospitals with OB units serving the South Side, including University of Chicago Medical Center, Roseland Community Hospital and Advocate Trinity Hospital.



Advocate Trinity Hospital in Chicago is one of only a few hospitals with OB units serving the South Side, Aug. 12, 2020. (Zbigniew Bzdak/Chicago Tribune)

“There are large swaths of land that have no OB unit forcing people to leave their neighborhoods and communities to find providers they trust and desire,” according to the birth center’s application to the Illinois Health Facilities and Services Review Board, which must approve the project in order

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The closures came in an area struggling with higher risks related to childbirth and pregnancy. The populations of South Shore and its surrounding neighborhood are largely Black, and, in Illinois, Black women were three times as likely to die from pregnancy-related medical conditions as white women between 2018 and 2020, according to a state health department report on maternal morbidity and mortality. The rate at which Black women suffered severe pregnancy or delivery complications was more than two times that of white women.

“It runs wide and it runs deep in terms of why is this occurring in a country like the United States,” said Dr. Robin Jones, an obstetrician/gynecologist at Rush University System for Health and chairperson of the Illinois Department of Public Health’s Maternal Mortality Review Committee. The disparities can be caused by a number of issues, including access to health insurance, access to quality health care services and laws and policies that create an unequal distribution of resources that can leave some groups vulnerable to health risks, according to the state report. Poverty, education, employment, housing, availability of child care, transportation and neighborhood safety all play into a woman’s ability to be healthy, according to the report.

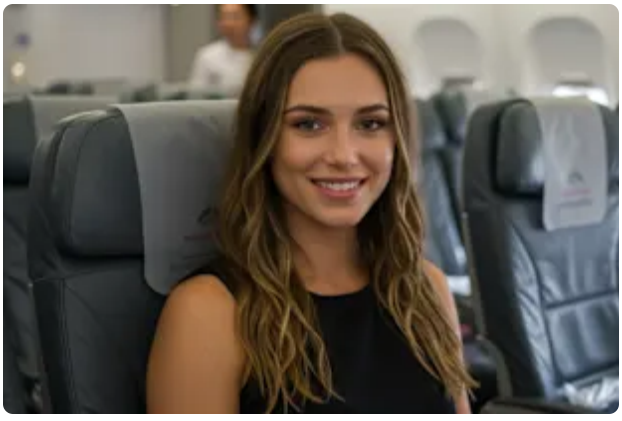
It will take a lot of financial resources, community programs and change to eliminate the disparities, but Jones hopes the birth center will help.

The birth center is not meant to take the place of a hospital. But it could mean more women on the South Side get care closer to home, said Jennifer Jaume, clinical director of the Birth Center of Chicago on the North Side. Jaume said 20% to 30% of patients at her North Side center are now traveling there from the South Side.

“Birth centers really should draw from a very local community, and right now people are driving long distances to get this very specialized care, but that’s not really the ideal model” Jaume said. “They’re seeking autonomy, respect and an independent birth environment where they can achieve their birth dreams.”

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