

Opinion/Guest column: Turning the tide on maternal health crisis

Jake Biscoglio President, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care

Aug. 17, 2025

For Kaelynn Garland, a time that should have been one of the happiest of her life turned into one of the most challenging when she went into labor seven weeks early with her twin girls. Facing family and health emergencies, and the stress of bringing home and caring for premature twin daughters in addition to having a toddler at home, Kaelynn and her husband, Seth, needed support.

Thankfully, Kaelynn and Seth had access to a program that helped provide them with much-needed assistance, offsetting expenses for daily neonatal intensive care unit visits and formula costs, and helping clarify milestones for their twins to ensure they were on track. The program, ProgenyHealth, offered by their health insurer, Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, provided a lifeline to the couple as they navigated their way through caring for their newborns. Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of NICU families each year find themselves in the NICU with their babies without the same support Kaelynn and her family received.

As a father of premature twins myself, I know firsthand how critical those early months are for support and needed resources — financial, emotional and physical. The statistics paint a dire picture. The United States has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the developed world, and these rates are on the rise. Additionally, the March of Dimes 2024 report card reveals that the preterm birth rate in the United States remains historically high, at 10.4%. In addition, perinatal depression affects up to one in seven women in the United States, and some studies suggest this number could be even higher. Turning the tide on the challenges facing moms and babies requires immediate and comprehensive action.

Looking at some of the key issues contributing to this crisis, several factors rise to the top. First, we must acknowledge the unique vulnerabilities of NICU babies, who represent more than 10% of live births in the United States. Medically complex and premature newborn care requires an integrated and coordinated approach, both in the hospital and at home, to ensure the best possible outcomes during their first year. Once discharged, these infants face a significant risk of hospital readmission without dedicated case management support for both the infant and their family.

Companies like ProgenyHealth provide comprehensive case management during and after a baby's time in the NICU or special care nursery, extending for a full year. This support makes a tangible difference in the lives of families navigating the complexities of caring for a vulnerable newborn while also managing other life challenges. Partnerships between insurers and organizations that provide much-needed support are a key component to empowering healthier lives for all, but there is still more to do.

Another area in need of improvement is the lack of widely available perinatal behavioral health support. Depression during pregnancy can increase the risk of preterm birth, babies being small for gestational age, and low birth weight. Postpartum depression can lead to a wide array of issues for both mother and child, from relationship problems and thoughts of self-harm for the mom to emotional and behavioral problems and delays in language development for the baby. Insurers must continue to help their members not only navigate this time by ensuring access to high-quality providers but also assistance to address the social, emotional and environmental factors that impact a woman's overall well-being. We must do all we can to ensure our wives, our partners, our mothers, our sisters are the healthiest they can be.

The focus on the maternal health crisis needs our year-round attention and action. We have witnessed the positive results of implementing new and innovative programs for moms and babies. Investing in maternal health is not just the right thing to do, it also provides substantial economic and social benefits. By investing in comprehensive person-centered care, New England can lead the way in creating a more supportive health care system for all mothers and families.

Let us work together to ensure every woman has the opportunity to experience a healthy pregnancy, safe delivery and a thriving postpartum period.

Jake Biscoglio is president of the commercial business at Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, a Point32Health company.