

Dear Members of the Health and Human Services Committee,

I am writing to express my support for bill S2380, which is intended to strengthen Rhode Island law to ensure that hospitals cannot close or significantly reduce birthing center services without a thorough state review, financial transparency, and meaningful public input. I speak to you as a pediatric expert, former Chair of the Department of Pediatrics at Newport Hospital, and dedicated Pediatrician to the children of Rhode Island.

As you may know, Newport Hospital was founded in 1873 as an independent, not for profit hospital serving Aquidneck Island. Lifespan Health System went on to acquire Newport Hospital in 1994, during the creation of the first integrated healthcare system in Rhode Island. Then, in 2024, a rebranding occurred renaming Lifespan to Brown University Health (BUH) and the Newport Hospital Birthing Center fell under the umbrella of BUH. Brown University Health is the largest medical system in Rhode Island, with recent branchings into Massachusetts. Newport Hospital heralds itself as one of 5 hospitals in Rhode Island that offers delivery services to the women and families of the state, however is the only BUH hospital that offers deliveries as well as maternal and neonatal care. It is notable that shortly after the rebranding of the largest healthcare system in Rhode Island, who receives the largest portion of state and therefore taxpayer support, announced the potential closure of The Birthing Center (TBC) around May 2025.

A maternal healthcare desert defined by the March of Dimes as a county with no obstetric providers or hospitals/birthing centers offering obstetric care. It is literally almost impossible to have a maternal healthcare desert in the state of Rhode Island, given the simple fact of the state's small size: ~1545 square miles. Except, Aquidneck Island, with towns including Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth, are literally only connected to the mainland by bridges, which from time to time, are forced to close. Closure of TBC as proposed by BUH would in fact create the first, and only, true maternal healthcare desert in this state. Repeated research shows increased morbidity and mortality to both expectant mothers and infants when birthing centers close; in layman's terms: increased injury and death of moms and babies. Expectant mothers are noted to have delay to establish care, decreased frequency of prenatal visits, higher incidence of postpartum hemorrhage, and higher incidence of delivering outside of a healthcare facility when they live within a healthcare desert. Newborns are at higher risk for low birth weight status/intrauterine growth restriction, prematurity, NICU admission, stillbirth, and death. Higher costs to mothers and life-long costs to affected infants will greatly increase the healthcare costs in Rhode Island. Let alone the grief, sorrow, uncertainty, and medical cost sustained by the families affected.

Please do not let the medical legacy of Rhode Island become another negative statistic in the national erosion of access to healthcare in the US. Please do not allow BUH, or any other medical organization in this state, to create care gaps or promote health inequity. Please vote to support the bills and resolutions as put forth today. Women and children of this state depend on you.

Sincerely,

Dr. Brooke Roebuck  
Middletown, RI

