

Birth center seeks funds for debut




📷 From left: Chris Heritage, AlexAnn Westlake, Kelsey Blake and Mary Carpenter take birth center questions in Eugene on Nov. 20.

By: Damien Sherwood - Updated: 1 day ago

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 Our Community Birth Center, a developing freestanding birth center in Lane County, officially launched its "Capital Fundraising Campaign" Nov. 20 in a bid to improve community-based nurse midwifery services in the area.

"We have a big goal but we know we can attain it with the support of the community," said the nonprofit birth center's executive director AlexAnn Westlake. "This is a service that the community has shown that they desire for the past 40 years and they continue to desire and deserve to have available."

The fundraising campaign will fund startup and early operating costs for the new birth center, which aims to fill a gap in care left by the recent transition of deliveries from PeaceHealth's Nurse Midwifery Birth Center in Springfield to the PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend.

A lack of deliveries annually at the off-campus Springfield birthing center was cited by PeaceHealth as a reason for the cessation of operations and transition to the RiverBend location.


The move resulted in criticism and protests from midwifery advocates in the community who voiced a desire for a standalone birth center.

The volunteer-led group Lane County Friends of the Birth Center were among critics of the decision. The group supports community access to an accredited, freestanding birth center and will serve as a consumer advisory board for Our Community Birth Center.

Last Wednesday, members of the new birth center's board presented their case and fielded questions in a press conference at the Oregon Wine Lab in Eugene.

"Currently there is a maternal health crisis in the U.S.," said Westlake. "C-section (cesarean section) rates are much higher than they should be. And birth centers are an evidence-based way to address that problem in our community and throughout the U.S."

The World Health Organization recommends a C-section rate between 10 and 15 percent for optimal maternal and neonatal outcomes. However, the Centers for Disease Control reported a rate of 32 percent in the United States for 2017. The same year, the Oregon Health Authority listed a 34 percent C-section rate in Lane County.

 Research indicates that midwifery and birth center care are safe and effective models toward reducing C-section birth rates. A 2013 study in the *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health*, for instance, found a 6 percent C-section rate for low-risk pregnant women who received care from a birth center. In 2016, a more targeted follow-up study looking at C-section rates in birth centers found the overall rate to be lower than 5 percent.

In a press statement, Westlake articulated the need for more out-of-hospital options.

"Statistically, birth centers make for healthier moms and babies — they improve health outcomes and lower the cost of healthcare," she said. "We believe childbearing families should have the choice of giving birth in an accredited freestanding birth center, access to out-of-hospital birth that is covered by health insurance, and empowering and informative support through their journey to parenthood. Our goal is to restore the full suite of wrap-around birth center services including pregnancy, birth, postpartum, newborn, lactation, health education, preventative health care, women's health, and family planning services that our community has accessed through the birth center for over 40 years."

For many, PeaceHealth's decision to transition services to its RiverBend facility represents another step in reducing birthing options for the area.

In Cottage Grove, birthing services were available until 1998 when the Cottage Grove Community Hospital closed. It was subsequently bought by PeaceHealth, which constructed the PeaceHealth Cottage Grove Community Medical Center at its current location.

The current Cottage Grove hospital does not offer delivery services because of the specialized resources and equipment required. The medical center also lacks the operating rooms and anesthesiologists needed in the event of an emergency C-section.

"PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend in Springfield offers all of these services, plus a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit [NICU], just a 30-minute drive away," said Tim Herrmann, chief administrative officer of Cottage Grove Community Medical Center, in a statement to *The Sentinel*. "Transport service to the NICU is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week in Lane County and the surrounding region."

Since Aug. 31, deliveries have no longer been allowed in the Nurse Midwifery Birth Center, which has existed in the community since the early '80s. Critics of the decision have characterized the move as a closure and have expressed concern that midwifery options will evaporate, citing a massive reduction in midwife staff.

"We'd like to clarify that the Nurse Midwifery Birth Center is not closing," said Marcy Marshall, director of marketing and communications for PeaceHealth's Oregon network in a statement to *The Sentinel*. "When deliveries moved from the birth center to PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center at RiverBend on Sept. 1, that was phase one of the transition of services."

PeaceHealth has stated that it intends on continuing family-centered birthing services at the present facility.


"We are working on a plan to rename and repurpose the birth center, continuing its legacy of being a vital component of our women's care and family services offerings," said Marhsall. "Our goal is to expand, not limit, these services, including midwifery, overall well-woman care, prenatal and postpartum care, which includes lactation support in partnership with other community organizations and practices in the community."

While the RiverBend location continues to provide delivery services, freestanding birth center advocates remain skeptical.

"The access to midwifery care that PeaceHealth is talking about is through an OB (obstetrician) office and the only option for a birthing person to have that midwifery care would be to birth in the hospital," said Dr. Emily Little, executive director of WellMama, a nonprofit which provides pregnancy and postpartum mental health support services. "So not only are there fewer midwives for folks to choose from in the model that PeaceHealth is offering, but it also isn't giving an option of an out-of-hospital birthing setting. So it's just not a complete picture to what the need and the gap is."

That gap is something Our Community Birth Center hopes to fill.

"There's currently nowhere in Lane County where families can access care in a freestanding birth center," said Westlake. "That does not exist anywhere in our community and that is that main thing that we plan to restore."

 Our Community Birth Center is not yet providing services, but will begin doing so as soon as the organization raises adequate funds and secures a facility. An opening date still remains uncertain.

"It's impossible to know for sure, but the earliest possible would be the fall of 2020," said Westlake.

The prospect of these services has animated many in the community to support the nonprofit.

"Lower costs, better outcomes," said Iris Bicksler, board president of Daisy Chain, a nonprofit which provides parental support services and education for individuals and families. "Midwifery care as a model of care is just kind of an important piece to our maternal health as a community."

Bicksler is looking forward to the potential for a broader and deeper network of nonprofits to expand client services and options.

"Now that they're a nonprofit, the ability for us as a community of nonprofits to collaborate in a really intentional and sustainable way is exciting," she said.

With increased collaboration, supporters hope, comes increased availability.

"People need choices," said Little. "Having this new freestanding birth center is hugely important for me personally, and as a perinatal health professional, to make sure that all of the people in our community have access to different choices."

More information on donations or volunteering with the center is available online at [www.ourcommunitybirth \(http://www.ourcommunitybirth\) center.org](http://www.ourcommunitybirthcenter.org).