

## MOM-NIBUS BILL'S IMPACT

# Giving MOMS what they need most

Extended Medicaid coverage puts important wellness services in reach of more new mothers

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**A** SKUNK, A MONKEY and a mermaid walked into a room ... well, actually, their mothers carried them.

Halloween costumes were encouraged at a recent weekly meeting of a mothers support group at The Elliot at River's Edge in Manchester. The group offers a safe, judgment-free space where new moms can get their questions answered and exchange worries and advice under the nurturing care of a veteran nurse.

"Women need women," said Colleen Moloney, who has been facilitating the moms group for 12 years. "Women need to talk to somebody else. They're so worried about doing everything perfectly."

Motherhood is not for the faint of heart. In today's busy, information-overloaded culture, many mothers struggle to balance everything expected of them, experts say. That struggle can take a toll in the weeks and months after childbirth.

"We want to be super moms and we want to do it all, but we cannot do it all," said Heather Martin, a maternal mental health specialist at Dartmouth Health in Manchester. "We need support."

Health experts say support services such as mental health care, lactation counseling and physical therapy can make a huge difference in the health and well-being of mothers. But those services often are available only to those with the financial means — or adequate health insurance — to afford them.



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Nurse Colleen Moloney takes a footprint from 4-month-old Mackland to make a keepsake as his mother, Susan Cail of Hudson, looks on. Moloney heads up a support group for new mothers at The Elliot at River's Edge in Manchester.



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Mom Olivia Hobart of Hudson plays with her 8-month-old daughter Everlee in the mirror at a meeting of the moms group.

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## Moms

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That's changing. Earlier this year, New Hampshire lawmakers passed a "Mom-nibus" bill that expands Medicaid coverage to 12 months postpartum for pregnancy-related services. Previously, that coverage lasted 60 days.

Henry Lipman, state Medicaid director at the Department of Health and Human Services, said the changes to Medicaid coverage began Oct. 1, though it will take more time to get the entire program up and running.

The intent is "to make sure that the mother is in good health to be able to care for their baby," Lipman said. "Because if the mom is experiencing health problems, it can also be a challenge to provide all the care that they want to for their child."

Medical and mental health issues such as diabetes and postpartum depression can develop months after childbirth, Lipman said. If such conditions rise, he said, "Sixty days is a very small window to take care of it."

### Rediscovering the world

Moloney, a registered nurse, has worked at Elliot Hospital for 37 years, first as a labor and delivery nurse for 25 years, then as a certified lactation consultant. She invites specialists and speakers to offer advice and care at her new moms group, which is free of charge and open to all, regardless of where they delivered their babies.

What these women are really seeking is connection, Moloney said. "Moms come to moms group to get out of the house and meet other moms," she said. "When you're home with a newborn who just eats, sleeps, pees and poops around the clock, you get caught up in that cycle and you forget there's a whole world out there."

Adrianna Manning of Hooksett, mother of 10-month-old Leo, said she attends the group "just to be around other first-time moms."

"I'm the only one in my family who has a baby, so it's hard to talk about breastfeeding and poop diapers with people who don't get it," Manning said.

Susan Cail of Hudson comes to the group with four-month-old Mackland, who was sporting a "Milk Monster" shirt for Halloween. She said she loves watching the older babies to see what lies ahead for her own little son.

She appreciates Moloney's calm and reassuring presence. "You are able to ask questions that maybe you don't want to bother your pediatrician about," Cail said. "I just feel very comfortable there, and supported."

She now wishes she had joined sooner. "It's a very supportive and judgment-free group," she said. "As a new mother, you feel a little isolated. It helps to get out of the house."

### A benefit to NH

Lipman said about a quarter of births in New Hampshire in 2022 were to mothers on Medicaid, about 3,000 babies a year.

As of Jan. 1, donors of breast milk and expanded lactation services will be covered under Medicaid. Also coming is coverage for doula services, but DHHS has to set up that program and licensing rules first, so Lipman said it may not be in place until late 2024 or early 2025.

A doula is trained to support the whole family in the weeks and months after birth, explained Krista Maltais, an advanced postpartum doula and lactation consultant in Hampton. "Everything from holding the baby so the parents can go take a nap, to giving strategies for sibling adjustment, to screening for mental health," she said. Lipman said the ex-

panded Medicaid coverage not only makes sense from a public-policy standpoint but also will save the state money in the long run.

"There's a personal benefit to the mom and the baby, but there's also a societal cost avoidance," he said.

Providing support services can help prepare women to return to the workforce sooner — and get off Medicaid, he said. "It's very hard to work when you're not feeling healthy," he said.

Brenda Jones, a physical therapist and childbirth educator with Southern New Hampshire Health in Nashua, said offering mothers such support for 12 months postpartum will reap multiple benefits. "The thing is, if moms don't get this care, it's not only their health that suffers, but it can also impact their families," she said.

Women need support throughout the whole childbirth experience, from fertility treatments through postpartum care, Jones said. "Things might not manifest until many months after you've had your baby," she said.

But women often neglect their own care, she said. "Many of us put ourselves as moms on the back burner while we take care of our families," she said.

In some countries, women automatically are referred to physical therapy after they deliver their babies, Jones said. "But not in ours," she said.

Jones teaches a virtual class for new moms that incorporates physical therapy, yoga and mindfulness practices. "You need to take care of yourself to be the best mom you can be," she tells women.

The group is a safe place for women to talk about their most intimate concerns, such as incontinence or painful intercourse, Jones said.

In the old days, Jones said, mothers were surrounded by support from their families and communities. "We're much more isolated as a culture now than we had been," she said. "And women thousands of years ago weren't trying to take care of babies and go to work."

"I want people to understand how important community is," Jones said. "Because if you feel like you have to do it all yourself, it's so isolating. We can't be everything to everyone."

### Moms need more time

Hampton doula Maltais founded Relief Parenting Respite & Resource Center after her own struggles with postpartum depression.

The center offers respite rooms, where new parents can nap, read or listen to music, and work rooms where they can catch up on work, all while caregivers look after their babies.

She currently does not accept medical insurance, but Maltais said she will apply to participate in Medicaid once the rules for that program are in place.

"Everybody could use postpartum doula care," she said. "It doesn't matter if it's your first baby or your fifth baby, there's always a new family transition that happens by adding a new family member."

Maltais said she is heartened by the growing recognition that families need help. "There are some serious struggles, and I think the pandemic highlighted that we are not just talking about gaps, we're talking about chasms that people are in," she said.

Martin from Dartmouth Health in Manchester said pediatric checkups can be an opportunity for providers to screen moms for physical and mental health issues and connect them with available resources. She has noticed that many women start to struggle four to six months postpartum.

"Because moms are going back to work," she said. "To shut them off at



Alyssa Harvey of Londonderry cradles 3-month-old Franklin, who's wearing his skunk costume for Halloween.



Adrianna Manning snuggles her 10-month-old, Leo, at the new moms group held at Elliot at River's Edge.



Melanie Lynch of Weare smiles as her 8-month-old baby, Ansley, feeds herself a snack at the moms group.



Ten-week-old Reese cuddles on the shoulder of her mom, Tianna Moloney of Litchfield. Tianna's mother-in-law, Colleen Moloney, facilitates the moms group.

## At the moms group

Once a week, The Elliot at River's Edge in Manchester hosts a free support group for new moms, where women can get their questions answered and exchange worries and advice under the nurturing care of a veteran nurse.

"Women need women," said Colleen Moloney, who has been facilitating the moms group for 12 years. "Women need to talk to somebody else. They're so worried about doing everything perfectly."



Everlee Hobart looks at her mom, Olivia, during the new moms group at Elliot at River's Edge. At right are Tianna Moloney and 10-week-old Reese.

that 60-day mark was just not a good thing at all."

"In other countries, they don't do what we do over here," Martin said. "We make our mothers go back to work, and they're not ready."

Martin is also the state coordinator for Postpartum Support International, taking calls from moms and other caregivers and connecting them with resources.

"They feel alone. They lack social supports," she said. "They're needing other moms that are going through similar situations."

### Severe situations

Martin said mental health conditions and overdoses are the No. 1 cause of pregnancy-related deaths in New Hampshire and

nationwide. She said more education is needed about the signs and symptoms of postpartum depression and other conditions, and where to seek help.

During hearings for the Mom-nibus bill, Martin shared the story of her sister, who struggled with postpartum depression and took her own life three weeks after her daughter was born. The bill passed the Senate by a rare unanimous vote.

Her sister is never far from her mind, Martin said. "I don't want another family to have to go through a similar circumstance," she said. "That has been my goal since the beginning."

Elliot Hospital's Moloney agreed screening mothers when they bring their babies for pediatric checkups can be vital in detecting mental health issues during

that first year.

"I think moms are falling through the cracks," she said.

So Moloney gently probes when she notices a mom in her weekly group who seems too quiet. "Are you getting enough sleep? Are you eating?" she'll ask. "Do you have anybody that's giving you a break? Can anybody watch the baby while you take a nap?"

### Give Mom a hand

Susan Cail, the Hudson mom, has been on unpaid maternity leave from her job as a second grade teacher at Main Dunstable School in Nashua. She's going back to teaching in January, and she's "already starting to panic," she said. "It's wild to think I'm going to be leaving him at daycare every single day," she said.

Her sister lives in Sweden, where moms and dads are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave when a child is born or adopted.

"When you have a baby in Sweden, you are introduced to mothers who have babies at the same time," a built-in support group, Cail said. "And every single baby born there has a pediatrician visit their home within the first month of the baby being born."

"It's just so different," Cail said.

Jones from Southern New Hampshire Health urges new mothers to find ways to take care of themselves, delegate some tasks and let other things go.

"You just gave birth to a human being," she says. "How do you rest and nurture yourself with whatever

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time you have?"

It's okay to ask for — and accept — help from friends and family members who offer, she said. "People want to help you, so let them do something," she said.

That's also Elliot nurse Moloney's advice for those who love new moms and want to visit them. "You really want to come see the baby?" she asked. "Bring food and let Mom take a nap."

"And then you have to leave, because they really don't want to entertain."

## Resources for Moms

- Postpartum Support International offers online support groups, links to providers and local volunteers, and live phone sessions for moms and dads. Visit [postpartum.net](http://postpartum.net) or call (or text "help" to) the PSI helpline: 1-800-944-4773, open 8 a.m. to 11 p.m.

- People in crisis should call the national Suicide & Crisis Lifeline by dialing 988.

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