

Timothy Casey (Secretary to the Board)

From: Maylene Pena <maylenepena@outlook.com>
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To: CookCounty Board (Secretary to the Board)
Subject: Maylene Pena - Written Testimony for Health and Hospitals Committee Hearing on June 27th at 1pm

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Hello, to all esteemed Members of the Cook County Board of Commissioners.

My name is Maylene Peña and I have been a Cook County Resident my entire life. I am a wife, a business owner, and a mother of three children. I am also a woman of color and have 3 firsthand accounts of the atrocities that we must face giving birth to our children in Cook County.

As a first-generation Afro-Latina growing up in one of the most impoverished urban areas of the City of Chicago, I knew nothing about life, healthcare, or childbirth. For a young woman in the early 2000's there weren't many programs to educate folks in the black and brown communities about contraception, so I became one of the statistics. I gave birth to my first child at the age of 18 via emergency cesarean section and almost lost my life and the life of my unborn baby because of medical neglect. Labor for me was induced due to decreased fetal movement, so I was admitted to the hospital to begin the birthing process. I was progressing normally until it was time to receive the epidural. Once it was placed in my spine, things began to feel extremely odd. I spoke up several times to warn the doctors and nurses that despite having received the epidural, I was in fact, still in pain. My fetus had shifted to the right side of my body, and I was feeling contractions on one side and not the other. My many calls were ignored as medical staff continued to dismiss my pain as pressure. After 16 hours of excruciating pain and being dismissed, my fetus went into cardiac arrest while still in my womb. The doctors scrambled to prepare my body for an emergency c-section, while trying to revive my unborn child through internal and external measures on the way to the operating room.

As I was placed on the operating table, I immediately felt an unbearable amount of pain as the doctor began the incision on my abdomen from right to left. I literally felt the scalpel pierce 7 layers of tissue on the right side of my stomach into my uterus. I was screaming uncontrollably in the worst pain I had ever felt and as I cried out the nurses assured me again over and over that it was NOT PAIN – That it was PRESSURE! I don't know exactly how many minutes it took for them to remove the baby from my uterus alive as I screamed at the top of my lungs and cried alone in that operating room, but I will never forget the pain! The only thing I remember is the sight of a tiny foot belonging to my brand-new son as they whisked him away to receive care. I passed out from the shock and my mother told me that I was screaming so loud she heard me at the end of the hallway where her and my young husband waited.

I woke up hours later in a recovery room alone, packed with pounds of heavy ice surrounding my abdominal section. I remember feeling so cold, and in so much pain. I was crying and screaming again when finally, a doctor appeared and without saying a word, everything went black. The doctor in the recovery room knocked me out with pain killers again. I missed the first 48 hours of my son's life. I was robbed of the skin-to-skin experience. My 125lb body was so brutally butchered that I couldn't walk, urinate, cough, sneeze or even hold my newborn for 5 days. The impact of this first experience held my body in such shock that I developed a MASSIVE keloid in the incision site that caused me crippling pain for 6 years until it was later excised during my second c-section. The lack of bonding with my newborn began a ripple effect that plagued me for years and set forth a chain reaction of Postpartum Depression, Anxiety, Chronic Pain, and PTSD.

You would think this story gets better with my next two children, also born via cesarean section, but it doesn't. I proceeded to have two more horrific birth experiences that are equally as impactful and terrifying. Six years after the first birth trauma, I was again on the operating table delivering my daughter. Although I was much older, better acquainted with the healthcare system, had private insurance, and my own primary care doctor, that did not prevent the birth from being equally life-threatening. The massive 2-inch-thick keloid that stretched across my abdomen needed to be excised after delivery. Thankfully, everything went well with the delivery, and I gave birth to a healthy and breathing baby girl. The chaos happened AFTER the baby was safe and I was receiving the care I needed to be semi-whole again. I again felt the all too familiar wave of pain that washed over my body as the sections of damaged tissue were being cut. I immediately began to scream as the anesthesiologist rushed to knock me out with meds, but it was too late. I was later told that because of the shock, my placenta began to swell and actively bleed. It took **SIX** doses of anti-coagulant to stop the bleeding. My husband had to threaten the doctors to sue them because they wanted to remove my entire uterus or just let me bleed to death – I was only 24 years old. He had to threaten professional doctors to keep trying to save my life! And the aftermath of that was another round of Postpartum Depression, more Chronic Pain and MORE ANXIETY.

My final birth happened 4 years ago at the age of 36 – and although the birth was a seamless c-section without complication, it was the aftercare that left behind the trauma. I was heavily encouraged by the nurses to discharge at 3 days postpartum (despite my constant pushback) and I was refused additional medication and an abdominal binder to provide support to my mid-section for the car ride home. As you can imagine, abdominal muscles are destroyed for women who undergo these extreme medical procedures to bring life into the world. I couldn't get up from a seated position, I couldn't walk, squat, cough, sneeze or climb. I went home in a pool of tears as I mustered all my inner strength to just make it from the wheelchair into our car all the while feeling the INTENSE pain of a 3-day old surgery in living color. And of course, more Chronic Pain, more Postpartum Depression and the WORST Anxiety, as it was all happening during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am now 40 years old and last year had to finally have an umbilical hernia repaired from damage caused as a result of the strain I endured from my last childbirth experience. I now suffer from moderate incontinence as well. I have endometriosis and every single menstrual cycle brings forth an entirely new set of cruel and unusual punishments. There is no aftercare, there is no physical therapy, there is no follow-up. There is nothing but pain meds offered to help me in Cook County. I have listened to many birth stories within my family of color and friends and the ongoing trend is that most of their stories sound a lot like mine. We need to do better! We can do better! And we will hold our elected officials accountable to bring forth the change needed to do something about the high maternal morbidity, and

mortality. We need people like Commissioner Miller to shine light on the disparities that black and brown women face to bring forth some solutions to this ongoing problem.

Best Regards.

Maylene Peña (she/her/ella)

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