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Inside a Class for Abortion Doulas

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A woman waiting for an abortion in Texas in 2016. Ilana Panich-Linsman for the Washington Post/Getty

The first group in the US to offer training in how to help someone through the process of ending a pregnancy.

Traditionally, a doula is someone who is there to offer you emotional support during your pregnancy, as you give birth, and sometimes in the postpartum period. She (most doulas, though not all, are women) is not a medical practitioner, but a hand-holder, a confidante, and an advocate.

Pregnant people certain need and deserve that kind of support—whether they keep the pregnancy or not. And that's where "full-spectrum" doulas come in.

A full-spectrum doula accompanies her client through an abortion the same way she would accompany them through birth. She can answer basic questions about the procedure and correct any misinformation the client might have, but her most important job is to be there for her client in their most vulnerable moment. An abortion doula might hold the client's hand through the procedure, make conversation to distract them from discomfort, and join them in the recovery room afterward, offering heating pads for cramps and talking through whatever emotions the client is experiencing. These are intense, complicated, often physically difficult experiences. It helps to know you're not going through them alone.



adoption, abortion, fertility, contraception, family building and planning, I could go on and on—as inherently linked," says Skylar Van Steenburg, co-owner of Denver's Luna Doulas. "A joyous or traumatic abortion experience might affect how, when, and if a person decides to be a parent."

That's why Van Steenburg, along with her cohort of birth workers and reproductive justice advocates in the Colorado Doula Project, decided to organize Colorado's first formal abortion doula training.

A group of nearly 50 women and nonbinary people convened at the University of Colorado Denver's Tivoli Student Union last weekend for the training. The Colorado Doula Project has been working for close to two years to produce this event. It's been both a long journey and a frantic sprint. The group spent more than a year trying to engage another doula project to come to Denver and run the training, but more and more logistical hurdles presented themselves.

"And then we were talking about it, and someone said, well, we have all this knowledge and training. Why don't we do it ourselves?" recalls Gina Martinez Valentín, a birth doula and core member of the CDP.

"We hit so many dead ends," says Piper Bonacquist, another core member, over lunch on the first day of training. "It almost hasn't sunk in yet that this is reality."

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The group's progress from "someone should do this" to "actually, we can do this" reflects a common narrative in reproductive justice advocacy. When law and custom impedes—or is simply indifferent to—reproductive choice, women and trans people step up and get it done. A well-known example of this kind of initiative is the Jane Collective, which started as an illegal abortion referral service before *Roe v. Wade* but ultimately learned to perform the procedures themselves. More recently, Women on Waves has been providing abortions in international waters for those who can't get them legally at home. The same spirit imbues the informal global network of people exchanging detailed information online about how to procure the pills for a medication abortion. These resources have always existed, alongside or in defiance of officially sanctioned channels.

Formalized training for the role of abortion doula dates back only ten years, to the inception of the Doula Project in New York City. Founded by three birth workers and reproductive choice advocates, the Doula Project is now a permanent presence at three Planned Parenthoods and one private clinic in the city.

"Everybody deserves compassionate support," says Sarah McCarry, a Doula Project spokesperson. "Abortion is still extremely stigmatized. We acknowledge that it can be a complicated decision and people can need emotional support and that doesn't mean it's the wrong choice."

At the Colorado Doula Project's training, the organizers and participants are discussing these issues when I arrive to observe. Van Steenburg and her Luna Doulas co-owner, Sierra Shaffer, lead the group of trained birth workers, abortion rights activists, and interested newcomers through a series of hypotheticals: Would they be able to doula for a client who has had multiple abortions? For someone who is addicted to drugs? Someone who speaks a



The participants acknowledge that some of these scenarios would challenge them. "I don't know if I know enough to offer the kind of support someone with a drug addiction needs," one says. "I might not be the best person to help them."

Shaffer, one of the Colorado Doula Project's core members and a facilitator of the training, reminds the trainees that a doula's job is not to know everything. "We can walk with people as a partner, not as a guide," she says. Van Steenburg and Shaffer both repeat this phrase several times throughout the exercise: "We meet people where they are."

Some of the trainees are longtime Colorado Doula Project members or supporters, while some are new to the concept of full-spectrum doula care. Many are drawn to this work because of personal experiences. Martinez Valentín has no regrets about keeping her unplanned pregnancy at 22, but the ostracization she faced as a young single parent made her realize that women's reproductive choices are all too often stigmatized.

"I was young and terrified and in need of support, but in my church I was being looked down on and being embarrassed for making the choice everyone said was



Melissa, a trainee who preferred I not use her last name, terminated a pregnancy at 17. "It was kind of a fairy-tale abortion," she recalls. "I had all the emotional support I needed, and I know most people don't get that." Melissa hopes that volunteering as an abortion doula will allow her to share her experience of being validated during a vulnerable time.

Laura Elsie realized there was a gap in her skill set when she supported a friend through an abortion in college: "I wanted to help her, but I didn't really have the resources I needed."

After receiving abortion doula training, these women can volunteer at clinics and Planned Parenthood—where their services are always needed—but they can also console a loved one through ending a pregnancy. "It's a skill set that's good for anyone who knows people who could potentially be pregnant to have," says Martinez Valentin.

While [a directory of doula projects](#) lists around 20 organizations offering abortion support in the United States, the number of trained volunteers is obviously dwarfed by the hundreds of thousands of abortions obtained annually. Since pretty much everyone alive knows someone who has had or will someday have an abortion, a weekend spent learning to help them seems like a worthwhile investment even for someone who doesn't plan to become a regular volunteer.

The domination of the federal government by anti-abortion Republicans has made this project seem especially urgent. Martinez Valentin says the CDP was overwhelmed by the response when they announced the training. They were determined to make it more affordable than most Doula training, and offered a sliding scale so that a spot cost as little as \$1. As a result, the training was filled to capacity almost immediately, and people sign up for the wait list for the next (as yet unscheduled) training every day.



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this that are offering things without waiting for a federally funded program to do it."

"You look around and it's like, what the fuck can I do?" says Bonacquist. "This is something we can do. We can make one person's life a little better."

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