



New Member Spotlight: Sarah Verbiest Advocates for Medicaid Extension

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For this new member spotlight, we're excited to highlight [Dr. Sarah Verbiest](#) and her successful work to help advocate for the extension of Medicaid benefits for tens of thousands of new mothers in North Carolina.

As her membership contribution, Professor Verbiest co-authored [a policy brief](#) with Belinda Pettiford (Department of Health and Human Services) on extending Medicaid coverage to new mothers in North Carolina from 60 days after giving birth to a full year. And on November 18th, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper signed a \$25.9 billion state budget that includes this important [extension of Medicaid benefits](#).

In the brief, Verbiest and Pettiford share that each year there are approximately 120,000 new mothers in North Carolina and this journey to motherhood can be complex. Not only do newborns require a high level of care, but new mothers also need support as they experience effects from the pregnancy and birth, take on their new parenting role, and often return to work within just a few weeks. Unfortunately, under the previous policy, around 45,000 new mothers in the state were losing access to their Medicaid coverage each year only 60 days after giving birth.

Losing access to health care meant these new mothers weren't receiving services for everything ranging from postpartum depression, to substance use problems, to more chronic conditions that can be brought on or exacerbated by pregnancy.

"Without access to care, women and their families have to suffer through these challenges which can impact maternal, infant, and family well-being as well as work productivity for both parents," write Verbiest and Pettiford.

Additionally, new mothers are still at risk of pregnancy-related death long after giving birth. In fact, Verbiest and Pettiford point out that, "up to 13% of maternal deaths occur more than 6 weeks after birth."

Beyond preventing negative health outcomes and maternal death, extending Medicaid benefits also has the potential for economic gains. Verbiest and Pettiford hypothesized in the brief that while extending Medicaid coverage for this group would require additional state funding, "the long term benefits to women, babies and

families would return this investment many times over.”

The brief came out of Verbiest’s work on the [North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force](#), to which she was appointed by Governor Roy Cooper. This legislative study commission -- composed of academics, public health experts, and legislators -- makes recommendations on how to prevent child fatality in the state.

As members of the commission, Verbiest and Pettiford were asked by North Carolina State Senator Jim Burgin to put together a policy brief that could show the effects of extending Medicaid for a full year postpartum. While this provision was already in effect in 2020 due to the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, its inclusion in the new budget means that such coverage will continue beyond the public health emergency, benefiting tens of thousands of new mothers and their children.

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Sarah Verbiest is a Clinical Associate Professor in the University of North Carolina School of Social Work. She has been appointed by Governor Roy Cooper to serve on the North Carolina Child Mortality Task Force, where she co-chairs the Perinatal Health Committee. Verbiest is a co-leader of the [North Carolina SSN chapter](#).