

# Mpls St Paul

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## Birthing New Realities

A Twin Cities expert on the leading-edge of NYC's evolving birth scene shares how her experience on the frontlines can impact local birth centers. Plus, advice from a doula on how new moms should reimagine the picture of support in these trying times.

by Jamie Korf



*courtesy of Health Foundations*

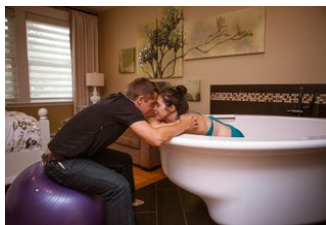
Health Foundations Birth Center on Grand Ave.

Being pregnant in a pandemic may sound like a dystopian, sci-fi plotline but for those who are currently expecting, navigating this new, tech-assisted normal—where questions linger and anxieties rise— isn't some storybook fantasy. This is real life.

In early March, some of the top hospitals on the East Coast employed strict visitation guidelines to keep COVID-19 patients separate from the patient population. A side effect of that meant banning partners of women who were delivering their babies there. While that specific rule has since lifted, there's no telling if it will return.

In an effort to keep distance from the virus, and distance from restrictions that could potentially eliminate birthing partners from the room, a growing number of women are turning to birth centers, viewing them as a safe middle ground between a home birth and the standard hospital route. Dr. Amy Johnson-Grass, founder, director, midwife, and naturopathic doctor at Health Foundations Birth Center in St. Paul has seen a significant climb in inquiries since the pandemic started taking hold.

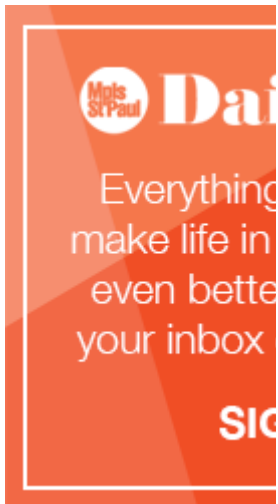
“It started in March where we saw a very marked increase of calls about delivering with us,” she says. “And then April and May filled up for us, and we’re continuing to get calls for the rest of the summer, through the fall, and even winter. I just think there are so many unknowns right now: ‘Will my partner be allowed to be with me?’ ‘Will I be separated from baby?’ ‘If I go to the hospital, am I going to have a higher exposure to



*c/o Health Foundations  
Birth Center*

COVID-19?’ We’re hearing these questions from women and families as they’re contacting the birth center.”

At this time, birthing rules don’t just vary state by state. They vary hospital by hospital and, depending on the area’s containment of the virus, can be retooled with little notice. “I think everybody [in the health care landscape] is really working to do their best, and I think everybody has a rhythm for today,” she says. “As states are opening up more, I’ll be honest ... I’m worried about that exposure.”



## A Temporary Measure

Johnson-Grass’ concerns about a second wave are rooted in firsthand experience. As the president of the American Association of Birth Centers (AABC), she’s been on the frontlines of the pandemic in New York City, working with hospitals, governments, and health departments to implement “auxiliary maternity units” for mothers and babies, reserving hospital beds and supplies for COVID-19 patients.



Dr. Amy Johnson-Grass, founder of Health Foundations Birth Center and president of American Association of Birth Centers

“These units came out because there was a lot of talk about things like ‘pop-up birth centers’ or ‘MASH units,’” she says. As the experts in community birth, AABC was tasked to write the guidelines on how to adequately take low-risk maternity care out of the hospital and into a community setting. “You’re not recreating a hospital, that’s not very realistic. It’s all under the guise of safety—these units have drills and equipment and staffing [like a hospital], but they’re meant to be temporary,” she says.

Taking this experience home with her, Johnson-Grass and team gradually and lightly adopted requisite hospital protocols. Health Foundations is in the planning stages of pursuing COVID-19 tests for labor and delivery patients and securing extra PPE for its staff.

“The hospitals here in our area are moving towards testing everyone when they come in for labor and now, as a community health provider, we’re thinking about what this looks like for us and how to secure the tests,” she says. Patients of the center are asked to be masked at all times for their in-person visits. Some have even revealed their surprise at the center’s recently established COVID-19 rules.

“As a health care facility, you know, it’s our job to keep everybody as safe and as healthy as possible,” says Johnson-Gross. “We are a small staff and if they get sick, we can’t help the families in our care. I always call our birth centers a place of wellness, and I think we’re doing a good job.”

## **Reimagining the Picture of Support**

Sarah Longacre, founder, owner, doula, and prenatal yoga instructor at Blooma Minneapolis, says she’s never seen the model for prenatal holistic care pivot so

quickly. Staying as educated as possible, she says, is the crutch to prop up expecting families during this time of uncertainty and fluidity.

“it’s about empowerment—what you read, how you surround yourself, having a community online, having cheerleaders next to you,” she says. “It’s putting a huge responsibility on oneself, which we know is extremely difficult. It makes us think more deeply about our choices, our care providers, what we’re reading, and how we’re preparing for birth.” What used to be considered self-care, like prenatal massage, should be rethought of in these challenging times as simply meditation, healthy food, a community of support, and moving the body.

“I [also] think the support of a doula is just as, if not more, important now,” says Longacre. “While a doula can’t be present physically at a hospital birth, it’s that support before birth, video/phone support during, and after baby arrives that’s so important. When your network is smaller, a doula can play an even bigger role. And if you’re planning to birth at home or in a birth center, a doula can still be present.”

While birthing partners have always shouldered a fair share of support in the process, he or she will need to level-up their role of being that physical and emotional base. And that starts before the delivery room.

“Having your partner be a part of your journey from the start is more important than ever,” she says. “It’s a *huge* ask. Previously, that responsibility could be spread between several folks but now, it’s on them. Also, having a trusted care team and friends or family a phone call away to help support you can make all the difference.”

It's important for moms to remind themselves that this isn't normal. Experiencing sadness and dark bouts of "woulda, coulda, shoulda" is valid. "New moms aren't supposed to be in quarantine. When you can't have your own family in to support you, hold the baby when you take a shower, make you dinner .... it's hard.

Bringing home a baby is big. I truly hope all new moms know they're not alone and they're so loved," she says. She recommends going outside, taking walks, connecting with people at a distance, finding support groups, and connecting with others on the same path.



Johnson-Grass adds, "Keep moving! We've all become inactive in different ways, so even if it's just running around doing everyday things, going in and out of the car, going up and down the stairs.

"Just remember that women are strong and have been having babies since the beginning of time and while it is a challenging time, no doubt, try and view it as a time of celebration. Taking safety precautions matters right now, but also remember it's okay to be happy and excited and joyful. We want you to feel good, and to be happy and healthy."



## Jamie Korf

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**Read more by Jamie Korf**