July 25, 2022

Monroe County
Department of Planning and Development
50 West Main Street
Rochester, NY 14614
Re: HBN American Rescue Plan Act Application

Dear Reviewer,

The ARPA application and space requirements prevented me from adding some critically important details about the Healthy Baby Network, that after some deliberation I thought I'd include in my own letter of support for our agency and application – I believe in our work THAT much.

I am the first director of color in HBN's 26-year history. I had an inexplicably high-risk pregnancy, and after a long painful induced birth, watched my very tiny, very early baby be placed in an incubator and rolled away to be transferred by ambulance to another hospital, where she would stay 5 days in the NICU. During those 5 days I struggled to heal, breastfeed, and bond with my daughter. That experience, though now over 20 years ago, sits with me every time I think about my role and purpose at HBN, every time I think about the parents we serve and the traumas they experience, and every time we discuss new interventions.

Diversity and representation are supremely important to the work HBN does. I am proud to share that every one of our front-line staff has lived expertise in the focus of their work. All except 3 live in our target area – even me. Our Board is 64% people of color, the staff is 98+% people of color, and we have diversity representing racial and ethnic representation, age, gender, sexual orientation, and freedom to either express or hold privately personal preferences and expressions. Even our newly developed Fatherhood Program has fathers of all ages, with children 6 months old – adulthood; one of the Fatherhood Staff is a father of an infant AND a grandfather. In 3 years, our staff has grown from 7 to 21 fulltime employees, and we have 3 vacancies yet to fill. We believe this speaks to our ability to innovate from where we are and based on need create strategic, meaningful, and needed interventions.

Our parent's voices vibrate in everything we do, and we intentionally seek their input in formal (like annual Community Listening Sessions) and informal (debrief discussions after meetings or events) input. We too are careful about how we describe our parents; because they are us, and like us; live, grow, play, and pray in the same neighborhoods. We know full well that we will cross paths with the parents we serve in the grocery store or gas station; so, we are intentional about how we talk to and describe them; and teach our partners to do the same. We host (with parents and partners) critical discussions about race, ethnicity, and other sensitive topics, and always from an open teaching place with kindness to learn, grow, and strategize together.

Healthy Baby Network

Every parent, Every baby

While broadly accepted we don't use words like, "communities of color or minority populations" instead of Black, or Latinx (unless we mean multiple populations), or "low income or Medicaid mothers or families". Instead, we use phrases like, "high risk/high need families" or "medically, socially, historically, or environmentally vulnerable". We also don't use terms like, "self-sufficient or insufficiency" when describing attributes; but instead talk reducing dependency on systems or autonomy. We know words have power and have the ability to hurt others.

We sincerely hope we have the opportunity extend our Doula Program, innovate our Fatherhood Program with this Reentry Program for Fathers, and build the infrastructure to integrate this work in our agency and across our community. It is connected to work we are doing; we know we can do it well, and we want to be a part of the American Rescue Plan Act work that is happening across our community. We are proud to submit this application, have joined other partners in collaborative applications, and believe in the work being proposed. We hope to hear from you soon, and to have our first opportunity to be funded by Monroe County.

Sincerely,

Sherita D. Bullock
Executive Director