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Opening, closure reflect tenuous landscape for birth centers

Center opening in Cambridge in July while Methuen Hospital plans to wind down its birth center in August

Alison Kuznitz

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Sen. Liz Miranda speaks at a maternal health forum on Wednesday, June 24, 2026.

Alison Kuznitz/SHNS

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, June 26, 2026.....Massachusetts is about to gain a birth center in Cambridge while a Methuen hospital is discontinuing some maternity services earlier than expected, underscoring the challenge of growing access to maternal healthcare.

At a forum Wednesday, Rep. Marjorie Decker and maternal healthcare advocates cheered the fast-approaching reopening of the Cambridge Health Alliance Birth Center, which closed in March 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The birth center hosted an open house last week, and a CHA spokesperson said it's on track to open for deliveries on July 6.

Seen as an alternative to hospital deliveries, birth centers feature a home-like environment for lower-risk pregnancies and are staffed by midwives who can offer more personalized care. A 2024 maternal health law removed regulatory barriers to operating freestanding birth centers and created a pathway for certified professional midwives to become licensed.

Massachusetts for now has just one freestanding birth center, Seven Sisters Midwifery & Community Birth Center in Florence.

"It's at imminent risk always of closing — not because there's no demand, but because MassHealth reimburses birth centers at 70% of hospital rates for the same care," said Sen. Liz Miranda, who noted the center has a monthly wait list.

As the forum was underway, the Massachusetts Nurses Association sounded the alarm about an apparent accelerated plan for Methuen Hospital to stop admitting new patients to its birth center next week.

Merrimack Health — the rebranded organization that encompasses Lawrence General Hospital and the former Holy Family Hospital campuses in Methuen and Haverhill — notified state health officials in April that it planned to discontinue the "maternity and neonatology services" on the Methuen campus on or around Aug. 1. Merrimack Health said Lawrence General, located less than two miles away, has "the capacity to care for all the patients currently receiving care at the Methuen campus."

The MNA said nurses learned Tuesday about Merrimack Health's decision to "prematurely close the unit." The Department of Public Health earlier this month deemed the maternal and newborn care "necessary for preserving access and health status within the Hospital's service area," though officials lack the authority to block the closure.

Karen Powers, a Methuen nurse and co-chair of the MNA's local bargaining unit at the hospital campus, said employees are "deeply saddened and frustrated by the hospital's decision."

"Our hearts are broken for our coworkers, and more importantly for our patients, who expected to deliver their babies in Methuen with the team they know and trust," Powers said. "During what should be one of the happiest times in their lives, they are instead being told that they must go elsewhere for their delivery."

A Merrimack Health spokesperson said the system decided to stop admitting new patients on June 29 to ensure continuity of care, minimize patient disruptions and avoid the need to transfer patients as the birth center winds down.

"We are continuing to respond to the Department of Public Health's essential services process, while physicians and clinicians coordinate with their patients on appropriate care plans," the spokesperson said in a statement to the News Service. "Patients who go into active labor after June 29 will be admitted to maternity services at Lawrence Hospital. Additionally, Methuen Hospital's Emergency Department remains ready to evaluate and care for any maternity patient who may arrive at the hospital, including safely facilitating transfer to Lawrence Hospital."

In Cambridge, the reopening birth center expects to have more than 100 deliveries in the first year and scale up to 300 by the fourth year, according to a CHA fact sheet. There are three renovated birthing rooms that all "feel like comfortable bedrooms in a home, not a standard hospital room." Two of the rooms have soaking tubs for water births, which CHA says help with pain management and faster labor times.

"At a time when many maternity units and birth centers are struggling to survive, even closing, CHA remains committed to providing maternal health access for our diverse communities," CHA said in a recent press release.

Construction is also expected to start this summer for a long envisioned birth center in Roxbury. But executive director Nashira Baril said the success of Neighborhood Birth Center depends on ongoing state regulatory efforts to license certified professional midwives.

"Getting CPMs fully licensed with appropriate reimbursement is essential to Neighborhood Birth Center and other birth centers being able to open, provide exceptional care and really to stay open," Baril said.

Baril said her facility is slated to open next year with four birth suites.

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