

# THE ROLE OF MATERNITY WAITING HOMES IN LATIN AMERICA

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In January 2026 the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) published the study [Community-based prevention of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality: a narrative review of the role of maternity waiting homes in Latin America](#).

Maternity waiting homes (MWHs) are residential facilities where pregnant women live during the last few weeks of their pregnancy and can easily be transported to a hospital equipped to provide emergency obstetric care or skilled birth attendance. The expansion of MWHs has been associated with the prevention of obstetric complications.



The study examines how MWHs have been implemented across Latin America, analyzing their evolution, the specific needs they address in different countries, and their impact on maternal and neonatal health outcomes throughout the region. Methods. The methodology of the study was based on a comprehensive narrative review of the literature available from the online databases in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, using a keyword search that included the Latin American region and country names, and on discussions with key informants in Cuba.



In the presentation of the study, it is highlighted that in Latin America, MWHs were first implemented in Cuba in 1962, followed years later by Chile, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Peru, Brazil, Panama, Paraguay, Mexico, and Colombia. In all these countries, MWHs were established as a strategy to reduce maternal mortality, albeit through various funding models and with varying levels of quality and consistency in services. Community engagement, cultural responsiveness, funding sustainability, women's autonomy, breadth and quality of services, and the evolution of MWHs beyond their original purpose are among the emergent themes in the findings. While countries such as Chile, Panama, and Peru have modified MWH designs and operations to incorporate indigenous traditional birthing practices and cultural preferences, countries such as Brazil, Cuba, and Paraguay have focused on practices that prioritize numerical outcomes over women's experiences and autonomy.



The findings suggest "a critical gap between the theoretical design of MWH programs and their practical implementation." The evolution of MWHs suggests that they address a spectrum of needs beyond their original purpose, such as providing culturally responsive maternal support and psychosocial and early childhood support. MWHs may be effective in reducing maternal and neonatal mortality when incorporated as part of wider maternal health strategies. Countries with persistently high maternal mortality, especially those with significant geographical barriers to care, could benefit from incorporating MWHs. Remarkably, the study did not find MWHs in any of the countries



with the highest maternal mortality ratios in the region: Haiti, Venezuela, Bolivia, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic.”

The authors of the article, Alejandra Marks and Arachu Castro, have dedicated this article to the memory of Dr. Francisco Rojas Ochoa, who pioneered the implementation of maternity waiting homes in Cuba and, therefore, in Latin America. They remain thankful to him and to Dr. María Cecilia Santana for sharing their knowledge about this primary health strategy in Cuba.

MWHs offer a versatile and potentially effective strategy for improving maternal and neonatal health outcomes. By addressing geographical, economic, and cultural barriers to skilled birth attendance, well-implemented MWHs can help reduce inequities in access to care. The diverse implementation models observed by the study throughout Latin America provide valuable lessons for countries seeking to establish or strengthen maternity waiting homes while respecting local contexts and needs.

It is hoped that this publication by the Pan American Health Organization will serve to relaunch the strategy for implementing maternity waiting homes in Latin American countries, which should be well integrated into national health systems and supported by their respective governments in their operation.

### To know more

[Study Community-based prevention of maternal and neonatal morbidity and mortality: a narrative review of the role of maternity waiting homes in Latin America pdf](#)

[Presentation Abstract in PAHO website](#)

[Hogares maternos en Cuba Article 2004](#)

[Hogares maternos en Cuba Manual 2015](#)

[MWHs in Nicaragua](#)

[MWHs in Nicaragua](#)

[MWHs in Mexico](#)

[MWHs in Panama](#)

[IDEASS Article 2018](#)

[WHO Publication: Maternity waiting Homes. A review of experiences 1996](#)

