



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Milwaukee Film Uses Healing Power of Storytelling to Address Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health**

*Christina Elmore of HBO's Insecure to headline Milwaukee Film's inaugural maternal health symposium*

**MILWAUKEE – Monday, March 7, 2022** – on Monday, Non-profit arts organization Milwaukee Film announced its plans to host its first-ever symposium on pregnancy-related mortality among Black women on March 26, as a part of World Doula Week. Drawing on the relationship between arts-based pedagogy and healing, the “Black Birth” maternal health symposium, presented by the Milwaukee County Office on African American Affairs, is a one-of-kind public health forum employing visual storytelling to address racial health disparities and promote empathic learning.

“For those unfamiliar with our work, it might seem odd for an arts and culture organization to host a conference on healthy birth outcomes,” said Geraud Blanks, Milwaukee Film’s Chief Innovation Officer. “But we’ve curated these types of events for years. In fact, this is the third or fourth time we’ve hosted a conversation around the topic of Black maternal healthcare.”

A 2019 collaboration with a local health network, Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin, established the Minority Health Film Festival—a platform that generated critical dialog around collective wellness, public health equity, and determinants of health in Milwaukee’s communities of color. Shifting to a virtual format in 2020, the festival screened Black maternal health documentary *The American Dream*, hosted a related conversation with Jennie Joseph of Commonsense Childbirth, Inc., and a panel featuring local doulas called “Birth Workers On The Front Lines.”

Rebranded the Cultures & Communities Festival in 2021, last year’s hybrid event included an in-person screening of Haimy Assefa’s short film “Black Birth,” followed by a panel discussion with area clinicians. “We didn’t choose the topic of Black maternal healthcare. It chose us,” Blanks says jokingly about the organization’s extensive programming dedicated to Black women’s reproductive health.

For Blanks and his team, it has not gone unnoticed how the topic of racial disparities in birthing outcomes have special resonance for care providers in Milwaukee, given Wisconsin’s maternal mortality rate for Black women ranks among the highest in the country. “After the 2021 festival, medical

professionals and community advocates from every sector of the city reached out, explaining to us just how urgent these types of discussions were,” Blanks recalls.

Responding to the request of local care providers and community advocates, Milwaukee Film expanded the original *Black Birth* forum to what is now an all-day interactive conference featuring a variety of short film presentations integrated into various breakout sessions. Split into panel and roundtable formats, morning “Inclusion & Equity” forums pair leading experts and advocates from around the city representing both medical and emotional models of perinatal health, while afternoon “Learning & Healing” sessions center the lived experiences of birthing people and their families through facilitated story sharing.

The symposium’s lunchtime keynote conversation features actress and maternal healthcare advocate Christina Elmore in a candid discussion with TMJ4 anchor Shannon Sims about onscreen representations of Black motherhood, including her own recurring role as “Condola” on HBO’s popular series *Insecure*. Keeping with the theme of storytelling and sharing, Elmore will talk openly about her pandemic childbirth journey, specifically how the death of George Floyd led her to choose an all-Black midwife team for the birth of her second child.

**“Black Birth: A Symposium on Black Maternal Health”** takes place at Saint Kate - The Arts Hotel on Saturday, March 26. Pre-registration begins Friday, March 11. Visit [mkefilm.org/blackbirth](https://mkefilm.org/blackbirth) for more information. Registration for the all-day conference is free and open to the public thanks to the generous support of long-time partners Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin, Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, Inc., Wellpoint Care Network (SaintA), as well as new partnerships with Greater Milwaukee Foundation Columbia Health System Endowment Fund for Women's Health, United Healthcare, and Progressive Health Centers.

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### **About Milwaukee Film**

Milwaukee Film is a non-profit arts organization dedicated to entertaining, educating, and engaging our community through cinematic experiences, with a vision to make Milwaukee a center for film culture. Milwaukee Film operates the magnificent Oriental Theatre, a historic cinema palace committed to high-quality and accessible film and education programming. The 14th annual Milwaukee Film Festival will be held April 21-May 5, 2022. For more information or to become a Member, visit [mkefilm.org](https://mkefilm.org). Facebook: [facebook.com/MilwaukeeFilm](https://facebook.com/MilwaukeeFilm) | Twitter: [@mkefilm](https://twitter.com/mkefilm) | Instagram: [@mkefilm](https://instagram.com/mkefilm)