

Health Advisory

Philadelphia Guidance on Plans of Safe Care for Infants Affected by Substance Use

August 19, 2025

SUMMARY POINTS

- Clinicians should screen for substance use during and after pregnancy using validated screening tools.
- Clinicians are required to notify ChildLine and offer a Plan of Safe Care for infants who are born “affected by” substance use and withdrawal.
- Even if Plans of Safe Care are declined, clinical teams should proactively offer resources and supports.

Background

Pennsylvania [law](#) (PA ACT 54) requires clinicians to notify the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS) via ChildLine when a new born infant is substance-affected. See also <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dhs/resources/keep-kids-safe/about-keep-kids-safe/plans-safe-care.html>.

The law also mandates that a multidisciplinary team develop a Plan of Safe Care (POSC) that lists services and support to ensure the safety and well-being of the substance affected infant (SAI) and their caregivers. Plans of Safe Care differ from other safety or family service plans by including services for the infant and their substance affected caregiver(s). These plans are **voluntary** and are intended to provide support—not punitive oversight—to families who may benefit from additional services.

Plan of Safe Care (POSC) Information

Under Act 54, infants “born affected by substance use or withdrawal symptoms” must be notified to PA DHS and offered a Plan of Safe Care. More information can be found in the Plans of Safe Care [document](#) and [FAQ](#) provided by PA DHS.

Plans for Safe Care are **voluntary**. If a caregiver declines, a call still must be made to the PA Childline noting that a child is affected by a substance at birth. And, while the caregiver may decline the plan, providers are still encouraged to offer helpful referrals and resources to assist the parent and newborn.

If a caregiver is interested in creating a Plan of Safe Care and PA DHS determines that the infant meets the definition of “substance-affected infant” (SAI), the POSC may be shared with the following organizations to assist with service coordination:

- Philadelphia Department of Human Services Prevention Services
- Maternity Care Coalition’s Healthy Families America program
- The Health Federation’s Family Case Coordination program
- Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health and Disability Services’ Infant Toddler Early Intervention Services
- The Single County Authority (formerly the Office of Addiction Services) Pregnant and Parenting Services

If the infant does not meet criteria of being a “substance-affected infant” (SAI), there is no POSC required. The voluntary preventative services above may be offered, but the POSC will not be shared with additional organizations.

Recommendations

In response to this requirement, The Philadelphia Department of Public Health convened a group of clinicians from Philadelphia hospitals to align practices, share expertise, and reduce variability across the city. Participants include representatives from:

- Temple University Hospital
- Pennsylvania Hospital
- Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania
- Lankenau Medical Center (Main Line Health)
- Thomas Jefferson University Hospital
- Jefferson Einstein Hospital
- St. Christopher's Hospital for Children (Tower Health)
- Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

Over the course of three years, this group developed consensus recommendations to support evidence-based screening, identify infants who may require notification to ChildLine and a POSC, and improve connections to local services. These recommendations are intended to **promote alignment, reduce confusion, and highlight best practices**—but they do not override Pennsylvania law, individual hospital policies, clinical discretion, or legal counsel.

Screening Recommendations

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends **universal substance use screening** as part of comprehensive obstetric care. This screening should use validated tools such as the [5Ps](#) or the [NIDA Quick Screen](#). **Note:** Screening is distinct from toxicology testing, which involves biological samples (e.g., urine) to detect recent substance use. Screening aims to build trust and assess risk, while testing provides time-limited biological evidence.

Notification & Reporting Recommendation

Under Act 54, infants “born affected by substance use or withdrawal symptoms,” defined by the state as an “infant with detectable physical, developmental, cognitive, or emotional delay or harm that is associated with maternal substance use or withdrawal, as assessed by a health care provider,” must be notified to PA DHS and offered a Plan of Safe Care.

The Philadelphia workgroup interprets this state notification requirement to apply to:

- Infants showing **clinical signs of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)**
- Infants with **Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)** or **Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome (NOWS)** that **require pharmacologic treatment**

This interpretation recognizes that not all substance-exposed infants require the same response, and many social and clinical factors may influence presentation. POSC procedures and definitions may differ in other Pennsylvania counties. These criteria are also **distinct** from those used for NAS reporting to the Philadelphia or Pennsylvania Department of Public Health.

When calling ChildLine, be sure to specify:

- Whether the call is a **notification** of an affected infant (required under Act 54),
- Or a **report of suspected abuse or neglect**, which is based on the Child Protective Services Law (CPSL).

Regardless of reason, ChildLine will determine if the infant meets the definition of “substance-affected infant” and whether the case requires further investigation, prevention services, or an “information-only” notation.

Even if the infant is not eligible for a POSC, or the caregiver declines, families may still benefit from voluntary services. Providers should proactively offer relevant resources and support.

Referrals to supports and programs for families affected by substance use disorder may include, but are not limited to, the following:

Program	Description	Website	Phone Number
CareConnect WarmLine	Provides expert consultation for providers caring for patients with perinatal substance use and psychiatric concerns, low-barrier buprenorphine prescriptions, and resource navigation and referrals	https://penncamp.org/get-help/	484-278-1679
Single County Authority (formerly Office of Addiction Services)	Supports connections to substance use disorder treatment, especially for pregnant and parenting people	https://dbhids.org/addiction-services	1 (888) 545-2600
Philly LIFTS	Supports connections to direct supports through a certified recovery specialist for infants affected by Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome and their families	https://www.substanceusephilly.com/nas	(215) 776-4406
Community Doula Support Program	Doulas who serve people with opioid use disorder (OUD) or other types of substance use disorder (SUD) and provide free emotional, educational, and informational support through pregnancy and 1 year after birth	https://redcap.phila.gov/surveys/?s=3MJWMKWJTN	(267) 324-4174
Philly Families CAN	Supports connections to free and personalized home visiting support professionals through pregnancy and up to age 5, and case management services to families with children ages 0-17	https://www.phillylovesfamilies.com/philly-families-can	(215) 685-4701
Community Legal Services - Family Advocacy Unit	Provides free legal advice and representation to residents of Philadelphia, and can support pregnant/parenting individuals prior to DHS involvement at birth	https://clsphila.org/services/family/	(215) 981-3700

Infant Toddler Early Intervention	Provides free development assessment and therapy services to newborns and children up to age 3, including all substance-exposed newborns	https://dbhids.org/services/intellectual-disability-services/childrens-services/early-intervention/	(215) 685-4646
Prevention Point	Provides free health and social services for communities affected by substance use	https://ppponline.org/	(215) 634-5271
Maternity Care Coalition – MOMobile and Healthy Families America	Provides access to medical care, mental health services, public benefits, and emergency supplies as well as information about health growth and development for the baby.	https://maternitycoalition.org/momobile/	(267) 972-0700