

# Yonkers advocate for Black maternal health to be Schumer's State of the Union guest

[Eduardo Cuevas](#), [Diana Dombrowski](#) - Rockland/Westchester Journal News – Feb. 7, 2023

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A Yonkers advocate for Black maternal health will attend the State of the Union at the nation's Capitol Tuesday.

Cheryl Brannan, founder of the nonprofit Sister to Sister International, will attend President Joe Biden's speech to Congress as a guest of U.S. Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y.

In March, Schumer [announced almost \\$1 million in funding](#) for St. John's Riverside Hospital to address maternal health disparities for Black women, which Brannan has long advocated to improve. That funding is going to renovate the hospital's maternity unit, which is the only maternity unit in Yonkers, New York's third largest city.



"Cheryl, she's not someone who's going to look at the data and shrug her shoulders," Schumer told the USA TODAY Network New York. "She wanted to take action, and she formed a coalition of advocates and health care workers to improve maternal health for Black women and girls."

In addition to Brannan, Schumer's office said he also plans to have eight other New Yorkers in attendance. These include [Kevin Kozlowski](#), a U.S. Army 82nd Airborne veteran in Fairport affected by burn pits in Iraq; [Stanley Whittingham](#), a Binghamton University researcher who pioneered the lithium ion battery; and [Zeneta Everherat](#), a Buffalo mother whose son was struck by a bullet during the [Tops grocery store shooting](#) by a white supremacist gunman.

Biden is expected to deliver his State of the Union address Tuesday at 9 p.m.

## **Brannan standing for safety, health of Black women**

Brannan, a Yonkers native, founded Sister to Sister International in 1994 to educate and empower Black women and girls. She previously founded the Yonkers chapter of the Westchester Black Women's Political Caucus, a political powerhouse that launched the careers of several local lawmakers, including New York State Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins. Brannan also served as the caucus' president.

More recently, Brannan worked to establish the Black Maternal and Child Center for Excellence, which had its ribbon cutting in Yonkers in November.

Brannan said in a phone interview Monday this would be her first time attending a State of the Union. It comes after more than two decades of work that started with Brannan's Sister to Sister International partnering with the World Health Organization in Africa to help provide the tools for a safer environment for women giving birth, such as kits to cut their baby's umbilical cord.

But she started to focus back home, in the U.S., after seeing maternal mortality rates for Black women, which research indicates is at least three times higher than white women giving birth.

"Clearly we have an issue here," she said.

## **Fighting for more funding for Black moms, babies**

Funds for the maternity unit at St. John's will go toward a renovated labor and delivery space big enough to allow for extended family members to be present. Brannan pushed for this funding as part of a bipartisan spending bill, Schumer said.

He also pointed to portions of what is known as "Momnibus" legislation, a series of bills meant to address disparities in maternal health and child care, that include permanent allowances for Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program and year-long postpartum coverage. In addition, Congress passed legislation for employers to provide time and space for breastfeeding parents and \$8 billion on block grants for child care.

Now, Schumer said, Democrats are pushing for the "Black Maternal Health Momnibus," a dozen bills aimed at addressing health outcomes for Black women and other women of color.

Schumer's office previously said St. John's serves 1,300 mothers a year, 28% of whom are Black. About two-thirds of maternity services go toward women on Medicaid or Medicaid-managed care, meant for lower income patients. With the announcement of the funding last year, St. John's president and CEO, Ronald Corti, said the hospital is working with Sister to Sister to address disparities in "maternal mortality, premature births, low birthweight births and our percentage of cesarean sections among Black birthing mothers." About \$34,000 of the funding will go toward getting public input from the community, which will be headed up by Black Women's Blueprint out of Brooklyn.

St. John's also anticipates additional funding to connect women to midwives and doulas and for anti-bias training, said Kay Scott, associate vice president for grant management. "She has done such work for this community in terms of bringing people together to highlight key women's health issues," Scott said of Brannan.

**Maternal Health:**[80% of maternal deaths are preventable. How NY plans to save more mothers' lives.](#)

## Health inequities in pregnancy an ongoing battle

A review board launched by state officials in 2019 [said in a report last year](#) that structural racism, discrimination and health inequality contributed to New York mothers' deaths from preventable complications associated with childbirth.

This came as Brannan's Sister to Sister International released a report the same year that found similar health disparities for Black moms in Yonkers and the Hudson Valley.

In the U.S., Black women have a maternal mortality rate more than three times that of white women, a [2021 article](#) in the American Journal of Public Health found analyzing vital statistics.

Often, this includes issues with preeclampsia, a type of high blood pressure that can occur during pregnancy, as well as hemorrhaging, that put Black women far more at risk when giving birth.

"We're trying to meet the patients where they are," said Dr. Suzanne Greenidge, an OB-GYN in Yonkers and senior attending physician at St. John's Riverside Hospital who advises the Black Maternal and Child Center of Excellence. "Whatever their needs are, that's what we're going to address."

Seated in the House Chamber gallery for the State of the Union, Brannan will be representing one of many important issues. She plans to continue her work on Black maternal health.

"Even though there's been a lot of progress," she said, "we're also seeing that we have a long way to go when it comes to undoing racism and promoting equity in our country."

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