

Economics of a Doula's Fees

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The economics of professional labor support work are a mystery to many people; I offer this information so that you'll have a better idea of what you're paying for:

Hours: Couples having a first baby may imagine that I'll only be spending a few hours with them during the labor and birth. In reality, an eight-hour labor would be considered pretty zippy; most first labors last longer than 16 hours; the longest continuous time I've spent providing labor support is 32 hours. Average time spent with a woman for her labor and birth is about 14 hours. I spend another 10 hours in prenatal and postpartum meetings and phone calls. My fee translates to an hourly rate of about \$18/hour, before expenses and self-employment taxes.

Clients per Week: When I make a commitment to be available to attend you in labor, I have to limit the number of clients I put on my calendar so as to avoid birth conflicts and to ensure that I am reasonably rested when you go into labor. The rule of thumb for birth professionals providing in-home services is that one client per week is a full schedule. Since most of my clients are first-time mothers, I find that three clients per month is a full-time workload.

Clients per Year: When I put your due date on my calendar, I commit to being available two weeks beforehand and two weeks after that date. This means that when I schedule a two-week vacation, I have to add another four weeks during which I cannot accept clients. A full calendar is 36 clients per year; in reality, there are some weeks where I have to turn clients away and then there are other weeks where I have no births on the calendar.

Expenses: The rule of thumb is that a self-employed professional's income is only half of what they earn, after deductions for vacation and sick time, self-employment taxes, health insurance, and business expenses. As you may imagine, my communication expenses are high - business phone, cell phone and computer connection; I also have routine professional and office expenses and unusual transportation and supplies expenses. In addition, I supply tools for your birth as part of providing doula care.

Putting It All Together: The annual income of someone providing labor support services with a responsible client load and a strong commitment to being available for your birth is 1/2 the number of clients per year times their fee per client. This is about 16 times the fee per client, and, yes, that's before taxes, including extra self-employment taxes. Although I am dedicated to this work, being on-call all the time requires a very high level of personal sacrifice, including a willingness to be beeped awake after half an hour of sleep to attend a labor for the next 40 hours. About 25% of my clients have some kind of early labor which starts and stops, resulting in two trips to their home and being beeped awake twice. I cannot take weekend trips away from the area, and even taking my kids to a movie or appointment might result in leaving early. I never know what I'm

going to encounter at a particular labor - I may end up wearing out my body supporting the woman in different birth positions; I may end up with blood, meconium or worse on my clothes.

Bottom Line: I am a self-supporting professional. There are people offering doula services at significantly reduced prices. Some are still in training, or are basically offering sliding scale services depending on your financial circumstances. I do offer this but on a very limited basis. Labor support is an underpaid profession that cannot attract or keep talented, skilled individuals by sharply reducing fees. If you end up selecting a doula who is undercharging for her services, I strongly encourage you to pay her more than she is asking. She's worth it.