



The Beginning: Why SISTA Fire Initiated Accountability

SISTA Fire's accountability process with Women and Infants Hospital began from a place of urgency, grounded in lived experience and collective grief.

In 2019, the tragic death of Lashonda Hazard and her unborn child made visible what our members had already been naming for years. Lashonda, a young Black mother from Providence, sought care at Women and Infants Hospital. Her repeated requests for help were dismissed. Her death was not an isolated incident. It reflected a broader pattern of institutional neglect experienced by Black women across this country.

Her story sharpened our focus and deepened our resolve to act.

This moment did not stand alone. It was built on years of listening and documentation led by SISTA Fire members. Between 2017 and 2021, we collected more than 500 surveys, conducted 25 in-depth interviews, and gathered 40 birth stories from women of color and birthing parents of color across Rhode Island. These stories were not collected solely in formal settings. They came from laundromats, markets, festivals, hair salons, and community gatherings. They came from places where people speak honestly about their lives.

We trained our own members to lead this work. They designed the questions, conducted the interviews, analyzed the data, and articulated the findings. This process affirmed a core belief that continues to guide our work. Our people are the experts in our experiences.

The findings were clear. Patterns of dismissal, poor communication, and harmful care experiences were not isolated. They were systemic. With this evidence, SISTA Fire began engaging the Women and Infants Hospital to demand accountability and change. Shannon Sullivan became the third president of the organization engaged in this process. By the time she entered her role, the foundation had already been laid through community voice, data collection, and sustained advocacy.

What followed was not a single intervention, but the development of an ongoing accountability relationship between SISTA Fire and the hospital. This relationship would go

on to shape institutional practice, improve patient experience, and create new models for how healthcare systems engage with the community.

The process between Women and Infants Hospital and SISTA Fire initiated a shift in how the hospital engages the community, delivers care, and practices accountability. This report is grounded in an interview with Shannon Sullivan, former President of WIH, and captures the evolution of this relationship over time.

It highlights the impact of sustained collaboration on maternal health outcomes, patient experience, and institutional practice. This reflection draws from leadership experience and offers clear insight into both progress and the opportunities ahead.

Impact and Institutional Change

The relationship between Women and Infants and SISTA Fire began amid tension. Community members were raising concerns about their care experiences, particularly Black and Brown women navigating pregnancy and childbirth within the hospital. These concerns were grounded in lived experience and required a response. As shared in the interview, “A lot of the concerns SISTA Fire raised were valid.” At the time, the relationship was largely adversarial. Trust was limited. Feedback often surfaced in moments of harm rather than as part of ongoing dialogue. Yet both SISTA Fire and hospital leadership chose to remain engaged. “It didn’t feel like something we should shy away from. It felt like something we needed to be open and honest about.” This decision created the conditions for change.

Over time, the relationship shifted from tension to structured collaboration. This shift required clarity, consistency, and a shared focus on outcomes. “At the end of the day, we have the same goals.” Rather than focusing on disagreement, both parties aligned on improving care for Black and Brown women. The language used to describe the work sometimes differed, but the direction remained consistent. “We can use different words, but we are working toward the same outcomes.” This alignment allowed the partnership to grow beyond individual relationships and become embedded across teams within the hospital. It is no longer dependent on one person. It is part of how the institution operates.

Changing How the Hospital Works with the Community

One of the most significant impacts of SISTA Fire is how Women and Infants now engage with the community. Previously, engagement was limited and reactive. Community input often emerged only when something went wrong. These moments were difficult spaces for collaboration and learning. SISTA Fire helped shift that dynamic. “*SISTA Fire has taught us how to work with the community in a way we hadn’t done before.*” Community insight is now

part of ongoing work. Feedback informs decisions earlier. Engagement is structured rather than episodic. This shift has strengthened the hospital's ability to respond, improve, and build trust.

Accountability as Practice

Accountability is now a defining feature of this partnership. It is not an abstract value. It is a consistent process. The partnership operates through clear cycles of planning, action, and review. *"We set priorities, defined what we needed from each other, and came back regularly to close the loop."* These accountability loops have strengthened follow-through and created transparency across teams. They have also built trust over time. *"That continuous cycle built both trust and results."* This structure allows the work to move forward, even when challenges arise.

Driving Concrete Change

The partnership has led to measurable changes in hospital systems and services. Women and Infants has expanded language access by hiring 24/7 Spanish interpreters and creating career pathways for staff to become certified interpreters. The hospital has strengthened its approach to patient experience, integrating community input into how care is delivered. It has also developed a postpartum hypertension program that directly addresses racial disparities, shaped by feedback from SISTA Fire. These changes reflect a consistent approach. *"Most of our work with SISTA Fire is concrete and data-driven."* SISTA Fire brings community knowledge. The hospital brings operational capacity and data. Together, they identify gaps and implement solutions that can be tracked and sustained.

Redefining Quality of Care

A critical shift within the hospital is how quality is defined. Clinical outcomes remain important, but they are no longer the only measure of success. Patient experience is now central. As described in the interview, *"How can two women with the same clinical experience leave feeling completely different? That's the gap."* SISTA Fire helped the hospital recognize that experience matters as much as outcome. A healthy delivery does not erase a harmful experience. *"If someone leaves feeling traumatized, even with a healthy outcome, that is still harm."* This reframing has influenced communication practices, trauma-informed care, and the overall approach to patient experience.

Expanding Insight Through Community

SISTA Fire has broadened the hospital's understanding of community experience. In the past, insight was limited and often surfaced during moments of crisis. Now, the community

perspective is integrated into ongoing work. *“They helped us understand there is a whole community perspective on care that we didn’t have insight into before.”* This shift allows the hospital to anticipate challenges, improve proactively, and reduce harm.

The influence of SISTA Fire extends beyond Women and Infants. They are actively shaping maternal health across Rhode Island through engagement with the Department of Health, collaboration with doulas and birth workers, and contributions to policy change. *“Their impact goes beyond Women and Infants.”* Their work connects institutional change with broader systems change, positioning the hospital within a larger ecosystem of impact.

Trust, Risk, and Leadership

This partnership required leadership to take risks. Transparency and accountability were not universally supported within the institution. *“I took a lot of criticism for being that open, but I trusted the relationship.”* That trust allowed both sides to engage honestly and remain aligned, even in moments of disagreement. *“Even when we didn’t agree, we stayed aligned on what we wanted.”* Trust is now a defining feature of the partnership and a key reason for its success.

SISTA Fire has built a strong foundation within Women and Infants. The next phase of their work is expansion. *“In some ways, they’ve outgrown us.”* The opportunity now is to scale this work across state systems, policy, and regulation. This will require navigating new challenges, including competing state priorities and complex policy environments. Women and Infants has an opportunity to remain a key partner in this next phase by aligning its institutional capacity with broader systems change efforts.

Conclusion

The partnership between Women and Infants Hospital and SISTA Fire has led to meaningful change. It has improved services, strengthened accountability, and reshaped the hospital's engagement with the community. It has also expanded the definition of quality care and built trust across institutions and the community. This work demonstrates that change is possible when partnership is structured, sustained, and grounded in shared goals. The impact is both practical and cultural. It has made the hospital stronger.