

The Suda Institute & Sun Clinic

Uncorking the Maternal Spirit: Whole-Person, Love-Centered Care for Perinatal Substance Use Disorder

The Suda Institute is a nonprofit in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, that supports the Sun Clinic, a perinatal substance use disorder (SUD) clinic serving pregnant and postpartum individuals across Cabarrus, Stanly, and Rowan counties, one of the most stigmatized and underserved populations in American healthcare. Physician champion Dr. Russell Suda began building community coalitions in 2015 and formally launched the SUN Project in 2019; the Suda Institute followed in 2022, when Gina Hofert joined as CEO. The work unfolds against a national backdrop in which 45% of U.S. counties lack an obstetrician and SUD in pregnancy has long been met with judgment and fear rather than care.

Three Starred Spotlight Systems

★ **Trust:** Trust is the clinical mechanism of the model. Providers meet patients, including those who used substances the morning of their first appointment, with a care plan rather than a reprimand, explicitly affirming maternal identity and normalizing lapse. At the systems level, formal information-sharing frameworks now connect healthcare, behavioral health, social services, law enforcement, and pharmacies.

★ **Transcend:** An excellent clinical hour cannot hold if the systems a mother encounters afterward undo it. Seven years of cross-sector coalition-building have extended trauma-informed, compassionate care to every touchpoint across the three counties, turning once-resistant partners into active collaborators.

★ **Nurture:** A multidisciplinary team (physician, LCSW, and peer recovery support specialist), given adequate time and ongoing Project ECHO learning, made love clinically possible and moved Dr. Suda from burnout and detachment to deep investment in his patients' lives.

Key Intervention

The Dr. Suda to Dr. Levy Handoff Protocol, a formal care transition in the third trimester, ensures continuity from prenatal care through delivery and into primary care, closing the postpartum gap that previously left patients without support at their most vulnerable moment. It is anchored by the Suda Institute itself: a coordinating nonprofit built to do what the clinic alone could not, brokering relationships, navigating legal barriers, and aligning community partners around a shared care philosophy.

Outcomes

More than 100 patients with perinatal SUD have been managed under the coordinated model since 2019. Patients who arrived actively using fentanyl have transitioned to buprenorphine within one to two weeks and sustained recovery through delivery and into the postpartum period, and the model has expanded through the RISE Clinic to men and women beyond the perinatal window. Both physicians describe moving from detachment toward genuine fulfillment in their work. Outcomes are largely qualitative and self-reported; formal retention and clinical metrics were not available in the source interview.