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Susan West Levine: Building a just and healthy community in Lowell

Ten years ago, Lowell Community Health Center moved into its new home in a renovated textile mill building on Jackson Street. Our staff, patients, and community knew then that creating a welcoming, dignified space reflecting the quality of care provided would be transformational. It has been.

Over the past decade, our number of patients has increased by more than 50%, we've added dental and eye care services, and expanded our work out in the community. In all, we reach nearly 50,000 people a year, in and outside of the exam room. Our staff has also more than doubled, now numbering 500.



The Health Center was overwhelmed by the support of those of you in our community — far too many to name here — who answered the call of our “Caring for Lowell, Caring for You” campaign, understanding that access to healthcare is a right, not a privilege. Our staff (who together raised \$150,000 for the campaign), our patients, our Board, elected officials, funders, community members—all came together to make what at first seemed like an impossible dream a reality. Galvanizing the collective goodwill of our greater community made this \$42.5 million project possible.

“We talk a lot about community, but what better example of community input and community impact is there in the region than Lowell CHC?” noted Michael Gallagher, who co-chaired the capital campaign.

A decade ago, we never imagined the COVID-19 crisis, and the ways it would impact every aspect of our lives, or how many of us would experience the devastating loss of loved ones and friends. The health center rose to the challenge. Thankfully, we had the space, the equipment, and a dedicated workforce to meet the pandemic head on.

Today, we find ourselves rebuilding once again. Instead of bricks and mortar, we're innovating and building new pathways to equitable care – breaking down the systems that created unjust barriers, which were amplified during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis demanded we examine every aspect of how we work toward our vision of a just and healthy community. COVID laid bare the ongoing impact of racism and injustice on Black and Brown communities, among immigrants, and the LGBTQ community.

At the height of the pandemic, in the summer of 2020, the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests and calls for justice across the nation emphasized the need to take more intentional action against racism. With that in mind, our Board enacted a resolution affirming that racism is a public health crisis. That declaration continues to hold us accountable. It's foundational to every decision we make and every service we provide.

We have much to build on — and much to build. Equitable access to care is not yet universal, although we are fortunate to live in a state that has demonstrated a firm commitment to health equity. New technologies are also helping us engage patients as partners in their care plans. These include virtual care, remote patient monitoring technology for diseases such as hypertension, and technologies that allow patients to manage their care from anywhere at any time.

We're using automated intelligence and old-school phone calls to reach patients who delayed routine care over the past three years. Our community health workers and case workers are making face-to-face contact to encourage life-saving screenings and vaccines while also tending to social needs, such as food, shelter, and transportation, that are essential to good health.

Community Health Centers were borne out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. One of the first community health centers was founded right here in Massachusetts by two Tufts University Physicians, including Dr. H. Jack Geiger who in 1969 wrote:

“... we cannot go on providing health services without regard to the system in which the roots of poverty, sickness, and many other social ills are embedded... we need a sense of passionate commitment to bring about the changes that are so urgently needed.”

That call to action is as relevant today as it was then. One of our patients put it best when they said, “People come here to be heard, understood, and helped.” They step into a warm and welcoming building that tells them, “You deserve only the best.”

I write this as a thank you. But it is also a promise. Lowell CHC will continue to work passionately and collaboratively alongside of and as part of the Greater Lowell community. Together, we can and will build a just and healthy community.

Susan West Levine is the CEO of Lowell Community Health Center.