

HEALTH EQUITY MATTERS

BLACK WOMEN ARE LEADING INITIATIVES TO CLOSE RACIAL GAPS IN HEALTHCARE.

BY PENNY DICKERSON



Kelli Tice, M.D., was appointed chief Health Equity officer in 2020 for Guidewell Florida Blue.

A 10-year-old Black boy with asthma struggles to live a healthy life without his inhaler. He has a single-mother who works a low-wage job and can't afford to miss work, nor can she regularly afford to pay pharmacy fees to purchase his life-sustaining medication.

A 17-year-old pregnant Black female lives in a rural town 45 miles from the closest hospital. With the aid of her aging grandmother, she endures a home delivery. Within five weeks, the infant demonstrates symptoms neither she nor her grandmother know how to remedy, so she calls an ambulance to transport herself and the infant to the emergency room.

These scenarios mildly represent the state of healthcare in America and how health equity has become a roll-off-the-tongue term widely used—frequently misunderstood—and illuminate social determinants and racial disparity.

A cross-section of ethnicities is affected, but achieving health equity is more of a dilemma for low-income Blacks and the aging population, many of whom have never properly navigated health systems.

Finding curative solutions through partnership, collaborative programs and deciphering data are some of the methodologies Kelli Tice, M.D., employs as chief Health Equity Officer and vice president of Medical Affairs for Guidewell Florida Blue.

Dr. Tice is also a licensed family physician appointed to her current role in 2020. It is a mammoth career position but one the Florida A&M University graduate has proven she can master. Dr. Tice attended medical school at the University of Florida and has since become a healthcare leader recognized nationally.

“The health equity definition that the team at Guidewell utilizes aligns with the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention),” Dr. Tice told ONYX Magazine, “It is broad, but more emphasis is on the part that no one should be prevented from achieving the highest level of health through preventable causes related to social justice, racism, discrimination.”

The CDC Office of Healthy Equity (OHC) Dr. Tice refers to specifically integrates its definition in its current mission and vision: *to ensure health equity is embedded in an all-of-public health approach to overcoming persistent health disparities and health inequities across a range of population groups that disproportionately experience poor health outcomes*. Ultimately, all people should have the opportunity to attain the highest level of health possible.

While it may sound easy enough to achieve, even the highest-level executives are often stumped.

“In the business sector, for instance, there are C-Suite-level executives that I think don't have a clear understanding of what [Health Equity] is and some of that is a result of not having been intentionally brought into conversations or sought after to support the work until very recently,” said Dr. Tice.

For the most part, a grassroots effort has been the best achieving effort, but Dr. Tice suggests:

“Let's raise awareness on the ground level. Let's help the community-based organizations move the way they need to move to interconnect things. Let's get leaders and champions involved who can drive the work, create the narrative and then let's get philanthropic support.”

According to Dr. Tice, the need and the recognition of C-Suite-level executives to really understand the work they are funding or supporting or letting their teams do it.

“Those of us who've been doing this work were slow to engage them in that capacity,” Dr. Tice said. “So, in the C-Suite, for instance, there are still those who believe that health equity is only social determinants and maybe even more specifically, it's food insecurity.”

Among those who engaged in “the work” is Leandris Liburd, Ph.D., M.P.H., M.A. Liburd holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, a Master of Public Health in Health Education/Health Behavior from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a Master of Arts in cultural anthropology and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in medical anthropology from Emory University.

She is the acting director for CDC’s Office of Health Equity (OHE) and has served as the associate director for Minority Health and Health Equity for the CDC/ATSDR since 2011.

In this capacity, she leads and supports a wide range of critical functions in the agency’s work in minority health, health equity, and women’s health.

Liburd further plays a critical leadership role in determining the agency’s vision for health equity, ensuring a rigorous and evidence-based approach to the practice of health equity and promoting the ethical practice of public health in communities vulnerable to health inequities.

“For many years, we focused on the individual and on compelling the individual to take certain actions, such as quitting smoking,” Liburd shared in a February CDC digital interview. “But now we are understanding that we have to, at the same time, be sensitive to the context in which they live, to help them take those actions.”

Habitual smokers don’t kick the habit each morning before going to work. While the practice is archaic in some workplaces, a few offer one to two daily “smoke-breaks” and more are needed.

Many places of employment are meeting that need and offering more. One company making strides in both health equity and vitality in the workplace is Cigna Healthcare. They selected the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District (CFTOD, the District) as a recipient of their 2023 Silver level Healthy Workforce Designation for demonstrating a strong commitment to improving the health and vitality of its employees through a workplace well-being program.

CFTOD offers fitness trackers, onsite fitness facilities, educational luncheons, and events on campus that feature massage therapists, emotional support dogs, drives, and onsite dermatology screenings. These offerings ensure that employees have easily accessible facilities, tools and educational resources.

The District has been recognized due to the strong support from the senior leadership team. District leadership advocates for the company’s wellness programs by taking an active role as participants along with ongoing promotion of activities to their respective department levels.

“At CFTOD, employee well-being is our top priority, and we are honored to receive the Cigna Healthy Workforce Designation,” District Administrator Glenton “Glen” Gilzean, Jr., said in a release.

“We recognize the crucial role that employee well-being plays in the success of an organization. The District will continue to provide employees with the necessary resources and support. CFTOD acknowledges that healthy employees contribute to a more productive, satisfied workforce, ultimately leading to positive outcomes for our taxpayers.”



Leandris Liburd, Ph.D., is acting director for the CDC’s Office of Health Equity.

The latter is a workplace homerun, but not a well-rounded solution for the earlier cited scenarios. A plethora of individuals are unemployed, maintain low-wage jobs, and depend on public transportation along with governmental and state programs to merely survive. They are deemed the most vulnerable population and often become the target market for insurers.

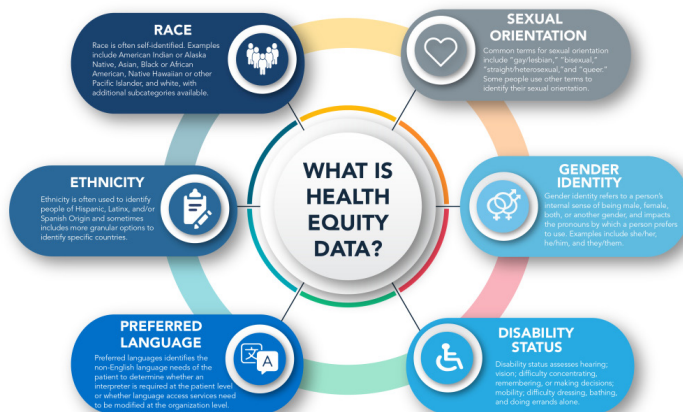
“There are a few plans that have chief health equity officers and a few other organizations that have just chief health officers,” said Dr. Tice.

“We at the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association have had a chief medical officer who oversees a group of health equity champions. So, whether you have a name like chief health equity officer or just have a person responsible for health equity efforts, we all come together and meet monthly to share best practices, pain points, consensus-build and learn from each other.”

Florida Blue announced in February that it is partnering with Sanitas Medical Center in Jacksonville to deliver primary care. Officials with the company considered it in keeping with a healthcare system that’s evolving from one based on volume to one based on value.

“The healthcare system has largely been fee-for-service,” said Elana Schrader, M.D., senior vice president of Florida Blue healthcare services and president of sister company GuideWell Health. “Now, we’re talking about paying for services that help us achieve better outcomes. It’s a whole new value equation. Value-based care has been around, but it’s growing and growing.”

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