

Community Health and Wellness

An Interview with Debbie Salas-Lopez, MD, MPH, Senior Vice President, Community and Population Health, Northwell Health

EDITORS' NOTE *Debbie Salas-Lopez joined Northwell Health in 2019 as senior vice president for transformation, responsible for system value-based initiatives that improve health and care delivery. She assumed her leadership role after serving as the chief transformation officer at Lehigh Valley Health Network where she led strategy and oversaw a unique and broad portfolio including community-based and population health initiatives, telehealth, connected care, innovation, strategic partnerships, and operational redesigning of the clinical delivery system. Salas-Lopez earned her MD from Rutgers School of Medicine and her MPH from Rutgers School of Public Health.*



Debbie Salas-Lopez

Will you highlight your role and key areas of focus?

I oversee the department of community and population health which is the department responsible for the overall strategy for working with our communities in terms of health and wellness, including community health equity and the social determinants of health. Over the past year, we have focused on COVID-19 testing and today we are focusing on vaccine distribution and community planning. We work closely with vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, particularly communities of color. We focus on the issues that are a priority to these communities, such as access to care and addressing chronic illnesses like diabetes and obesity, which are prevalent in underserved communities. We have a responsibility to all the communities we serve, and particularly to those who are vulnerable.

What are the keys to being successful and driving lasting change in these communities?

A key to having a successful community health and wellness strategy is building relationships in the communities we serve. This takes time as you need to have a presence and build trust. It is about caring and taking the time to listen and understand what is most important to our communities. An example of this occurred last year when COVID-19 testing was at a premium and there was not a lot of testing available. We made a special effort to go into our poor and disadvantaged communities that were being devastated by COVID and provided free testing at community and faith-based organizations. Today, we are leveraging the relationships

that we created with these community and faith-based organizations to provide access to the vaccine. We have now created a Health Equity Taskforce with over 100 CBO's and FBO's to ensure the safe and equitable distribution of the vaccine. Our communities know that Northwell cares since we were there when they needed us the most.

How important is it to look at health as more than just about illness and expanding the focus on prevention and wellness?

This is critical and we consider the totality of the communities' health and wellness. Statistics show that a person's health is only 20 percent dependent on the medical care they receive, while the other 80 percent is dependent on other factors such as access to healthy food, violence, safety, their own behaviors, level of education, poverty, and employment. We view health and wellness in a holistic way that takes into account the entire picture, not just as being the delivery of medical care. For example, access to healthy foods is essential to health and wellness. This is an area that health systems can partner with community-based organizations like food pantries, large food chains, and corner stores to make a difference in neighborhoods that have food deserts. There are many examples of community issues that health systems can partner with community and faith-based organizations that have the experience and trust of communities. This requires having the humility to know when we can lead and when we need to follow. Building relationships with community and faith-based organizations is key and synergistic as the size, scale and influence of a health system, in conjunction with their expertise and know-how, can effectively provide needed resources to our communities.

Will you discuss Northwell Health's commitment to building a diverse and inclusive workforce in order to mirror the diversity of the patients and communities it serves?

Northwell Health has had a long-standing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It starts with building a diverse workforce. We ensure we provide opportunities for employment across all of our diverse communities. Last year, our organization signed a pledge declaring racism a public health crisis. Today, it is more important than ever for the community to see someone that looks like them, who speaks their language and who understands their culture. This is a priority for Northwell. Over the past year, our communities

of color were devastated by COVID-19 and seeing someone like Sandra Lindsay, a nurse at Northwell who is a female of color, get the first vaccine shot in the country outside of a clinical trial, and her vaccine being administered by Dr. Michelle Chester, Northwell's director of employee health services, who is also a female of color, was important because access to the vaccine in these communities is critical. Education and outreach on COVID-19 is also essential so we have recruited our diverse Northwell colleagues to provide videos of themselves talking about the importance of the vaccine, social distancing and wearing masks since we feel that it is our responsibility to provide this education and information. We need the trust of our communities and working with someone who understands them and relates to them is critical.

What was the vision for creating the Center for Equity of Care and how has it evolved?

The Center for Equity of Care was started ten years ago with the mission of eliminating health disparities and delivering the highest quality care to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, cultural background, language proficiency, literacy, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, disability or socioeconomic status. The Center is focused on building a culture of inclusion within the Northwell community as well as within the external community. It is about working with the community so that they can be empowered in terms of their own health management. This has been a ten-year journey and the work of the Center for Equity of Care continues to evolve to include education and issues around social justice. The Center is addressing racism, unconscious bias, and other societal issues that impact the delivery of care. Northwell has ranked #1 in 2020 and 2021 by DiversityInc in recognition of this work although we understand that this work is a journey and much remains to be done.

How special is it for you to work for an institution like Northwell Health that is committed to addressing societal need and tackling challenging issues?

I feel blessed and honored to work at Northwell and to be part of this community. Michael Dowling, our President and CEO, sets the tone and is not afraid to take a stand against racism, health inequities, and social injustices. We have a leadership team that cares about diversity and is engaged with who we are recruiting and how we are retaining our talent. I am fortunate to be a part of this institution and to have the opportunity to do the critical work we do every day. ●