

Improving Health

An Interview with
Dr. Garth Graham, President, Aetna Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Garth Graham previously served as Deputy Assistant Secretary in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, where he also led the Office of Minority Health. Immediately prior to joining the Aetna Foundation, Graham was the Assistant Dean for Health Policy and Chief of Health Services research at the University of Florida School of Medicine in Gainesville. Graham has authored articles that have been published in the Journal of the American Medical Association,



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Health Affairs, and Circulation. His book, *The Role of Decentralization in Strengthening Equity in Healthcare*, was published in 2009. He has served on the faculty of the University of Florida School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School, and currently serves as Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine. Graham holds a bachelor of science in biology from Florida International University in Miami, a master's in public health from Yale School of Public Health, and a medical degree from Yale School of Medicine. He completed clinical training at Massachusetts General Hospital and Johns Hopkins. He is board certified in both internal medicine and cardiovascular disease.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF The Aetna Foundation (aetnafoundation.org) is the independent charitable and philanthropic arm of Aetna. Since 1980, Aetna and the Aetna Foundation have contributed more than \$465 million in grants and sponsorships. As a national health foundation, they promote wellness, health, and access to high-quality healthcare for everyone. This work is enhanced by the time and commitment of Aetna employees, who have volunteered 3.8 million hours since 2003.

Has the mission for the foundation remained consistent as it has evolved?

Since around 1980 or so, the Aetna Foundation has given close to \$500 million in grants and awards. We started out in the '80s with a commitment to promoting wellness, health, and access to high-quality care for everyone. We have maintained that focus over the past 36 years.

The foundation has evolved into looking at how we can promote a diverse healthcare workforce that is reflective of our population, as well as how we use technology and other innovative

emerging tools to make healthcare easier and better for everyone.

Our mission has evolved with the changing demographics and growing opportunities to use technology and innovation to improve health.

How close is the coordination between the foundation and the business?

The foundation has a separate function and mission, but making sure we bring effective healthcare to our communities across the board is something we certainly have in common. There is a

budget focus on the foundation side but our goal is impacting communities.

Within Aetna, we have a high interest in philanthropic and community-based activities from our leadership. There is a lot of crossover in terms of impact, and our leaders on the business side bring a lot of that energy to their volunteer efforts within the foundation.

Are there one or two larger signature programs or are your objectives broader?

We put an emphasis on larger signature programs. For example, we partner with local governments to build healthier communities. We also take into account education, transportation, housing, and a living wage to help in our mission to build a healthier world. We also focus on how to use technology and other innovative tools that are often geared towards the upper echelons of society to all aspects of society, to help people from all walks of life benefit.

Is it challenging to put metrics around these programs?

We want to have a measurable impact and show process that was either directly funded by or came about because of our involvement.

Metrics are at the core of what we do. As a large healthcare company, we understand health goes beyond the doctor's office, so we look at the social aspects affecting health when we set up funding within a particular community to measure change and difference. We need to show that our engagement and funding have caused something new and catalytic to happen.

How critical is it for your healthcare focus to be comprehensive?

We need to have a strategy for at least understanding it holistically. Health is a confluence of a number of different things. It involves things like avoiding tobacco and maintaining good nutrition, but also building a safe environment where

people live, as well as other things like education and socioeconomic factors. These things have a bigger impact than the actual doctor's visit in terms of overall health.

We try to align with partners that can impact any of those aspects within their local communities and measure that impact. For us, it's about having a hyper-local approach and being able to track the effectiveness with metrics.

How important is it for employees to be a part of a company that has this type of philanthropic focus?

For Aetna employees, this community involvement and how we work in the community is part of the DNA of the company. In recent years, our employees have volunteered over 400,000 hours of their time.

When this opportunity presented itself, what made you feel it would be the right fit?

Aetna has always been committed to make health equitable for everyone. As someone who was working in academia and government on health disparities, being able to come to a top Fortune 50 company whose mission is the elimination of health disparities attracted me. It's something we really look to accomplish as an organization.

Is it important to celebrate the small wins to help avoid getting caught up with how big the problems are?

We can celebrate that there are large corporations, government entities, and many in the community that have been able to show that their investments are impactful. It's important for us to celebrate the kind of wins we have achieved, especially at the local community level.

The problems become larger the higher we take things. We still face significant challenges in healthcare, certainly for poor and underserved communities across the country.

But we have a number of good local avenues in which people are doing innovative things on the ground to make communities healthier.

With so many challenges, is it hard to be optimistic that we are doing the right things to move the ball forward?

I have found with my job here and through other related activities that getting close to communities at the local level is where the most exciting things are happening. The real challenge for us is having those local success stories build a patchwork of change at the national level. I am excited to see change locally. ●