

# Community And Population Health

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

**EDITORS' NOTE** As Senior Vice President of Community and Population Health, Dr. Debbie Salas-Lopez oversees Northwell Health's community and public health strategy, including community health equity, community relations, strategic community partnerships, corporate social responsibility, and the Community Health Needs Assessment. Dr. Salas-Lopez joined Northwell 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. In 2021, Modern Healthcare named her to its annual Top 25 Women Leaders as a "Woman to Watch." She also received the 2021 Tribute to Excellence in Healthcare award from the United Hospital Fund. Dr. Salas-Lopez was recognized in 2021 by the Hospital Association of New York State with a Community Health Improvement Award. She also has earned a Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Leadership Award, the Long Island Coalition for Homeless Key of Excellence Award, and the 2021 Empire Whole Health Heroes Award.



Dr. Debbie Salas-Lopez

**What are the keys to driving lasting change in addressing the social determinants of health and how is Northwell Health tackling this issue?**

The social determinants of health existed before the pandemic, but were also clearly worsened by the pandemic. It is a complex issue, and I have found that the most important way to address the social determinants of health is to go out into the community and listen to what they believe is important for their health and well-being. We have taken

this approach at Northwell, and we meet with leaders from all parts of the community to ask them what their priorities are and what they believe is needed to improve the health and wellness in their community. These are the four things that they have told us, and continue to tell us even today, are important for them and for their communities:

The first is education and youth because young people are our future, and in many underserved communities where there are social issues related to health, education is key. There were setbacks during the pandemic, particularly for youth in underserved communities because remote learning was not something these communities were used to. One initiative that was launched in 2021 in partnership with the community was the Northwell Community Scholars program. This program provides support, mentorship, and opportunities for students from 10th grade through 12th grade in communities where there are high social vulnerabilities, high uninsured rates, lack of mental health services – we can tell you where our most vulnerable communities are today based on those criteria. We are partnering with high schools and when students graduate 12th grade, we support them to attend a two-year community college with tuition, books reimbursement, and any other social needs, such as a laptop, a MetroCard to help them get to school, and a food subsidy card to purchase food. This year 37 students are graduating from Nassau Community College and Suffolk County Community College and are successfully moving on to a four-year school to continue their studies or starting employment. This program is in seven high schools and by the end of this year we will be supporting 240 students within these vulnerable communities.

The second is economic vitality. Our communities are telling us that many businesses have gone out of business and there are high unemployment rates in vulnerable communities. Northwell has a

supplier diversity program, and we have committed to dedicate 10 percent of our Northwell spend to women-owned businesses and minority-owned businesses. We also launched a program called Communities-at-Work where our human resources team partners with faith-based leaders and community leaders to meet people where they are in the community. For example, we go to Harlem and provide support with how to interview for a job opportunity, how to dress when going on an interview, and how to write a resume. It is critical to focus on economic vitality to support our communities.

The third area is the neighborhood and physical environment where we focus on issues such as gun violence and human trafficking. We are also very focused on addressing the issue of food insecurity and access to healthy food which is a major factor in the social determinants of health. We have a Farm-To-Table initiative in partnership with Queens County Farm Museum, which is the oldest working farm in New York State, where everyone is welcome to learn healthy eating habits and purchase food at an affordable price since it is well-known that healthy eating is important in preventing chronic illness in the future. Our hospital chefs go to the farm to teach people how to cook and eat healthy, providing on-site education to students and members of the community who visit the farm. We also feel that hospital food should be quality food and at Northwell we hire Michelin-starred chefs to cook for our patients while they are here.

The fourth area is health and healthcare disparities. The main priorities we focus on in this area are mental health, diabetes and obesity, cancer screening and prevention, and maternal health, particularly for Black moms and birthing persons since mortality is so high. In the area of mental health, for example, we are working with faith leaders since we learned that they are trusted ambassadors in the community, and we host forums with them about mental health because mental health is the new pandemic, and like COVID, it is invisible, particularly affecting our youth. We are training faith leaders on the issue of mental health so they can provide guidance and low intensity behavior therapy to people dealing with a mental health concern.

These are examples of ways that Northwell Health, as a mission-driven organization, is partnering with our communities to move the needle on the health-related social needs of our communities. ●

## Will you highlight your career journey?

I was born and raised in the Bronx, and moved to New Jersey in my teens. I started my career in real estate, but met a person who asked me a question that would change the course of my life. I had just sold her a house and she asked me, "Is this what you wanted to do when you were growing up?" I replied, "No, I wanted to be a doctor." I told her I didn't know how to become a doctor since I grew up at a time when the Bronx was burning, and my main focus was on getting to and from school safely. Now that I had become a successful real estate agent, it was possible for me to pursue this passion, but I needed to figure out how. She guided me on the process, and I found my way to take the MCAT while I continued to sell real estate, and when I received my scores, I applied to medical school and was accepted on a scholarship.

My father was a minister and he raised me and my siblings to care for others and take care of others. I followed this value that he instilled in me to take care of others as a physician, and since then have dedicated my life to taking care of the underserved, communities of color, and those that are vulnerable.