

Opportunities In Healthcare

An Interview with Salimah Velji, MPH, MBA,
Unified Executive Administrator, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Montefiore Health System

EDITORS' NOTE Salimah Velji is Unified Executive Administrator in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Montefiore. In 2023, she was also selected as the inaugural Executive Director of Strategy and Operations in the Department of Medicine. Prior to joining Montefiore Einstein, Velji served as Program Administrator in the Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven, Senior Administrative Director for Clinical Operations and New Initiatives in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, and Departmental Administrator/Chief Financial Officer in the Department of Urology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center. She earned her undergraduate degrees in business administration and health sciences from Ivey Business School of Western University in Ontario, graduating with honors. She later received her MBA from Yale School of Management and her Master of Public Health from Yale School of Public Health.



Salimah Velji

INSTITUTION BRIEF Montefiore Medicine (montefiore.org) is a leading academic medical organization comprised of Montefiore Health System and Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Together they are pioneering patient-centered research and providing exceptional personalized care with over six million patient interactions a year in communities across the Bronx, Westchester and the Hudson Valley. Montefiore Health System is comprised of 10 member hospitals, including the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, Burke Rehabilitation Hospital, White Plains Hospital, and more than 200 outpatient ambulatory care sites that provide coordinated, comprehensive care to patients and their families. Albert Einstein College of Medicine, home to nearly 1,000 students in its MD, PhD, and combined MD/PhD programs, is one of the nation's preeminent centers for research, medical education and clinical investigation.

How do you define Montefiore Health System's culture and values?

Montefiore Health System's leaders and staff strive for excellence while maintaining compassion, integrity, and a deep appreciation for remaining humble. You can tell a lot about an institution or individual by the problems they choose to solve. From the beginning, Montefiore was one of the first hospitals in New York City

to serve immigrants regardless of their background or means. Albert Einstein College of Medicine was one of the first medical schools in the country to educate students of diverse backgrounds. Together, Montefiore Einstein became a model for how healthcare can promote social justice. At Montefiore, we are relentless in our pursuit to tackle hard problems in imaginative ways to best serve our complex and diverse patient population. We embrace humanity, innovation, teamwork, diversity, and equity across every problem

we solve.

What have been the keys to Montefiore Health System's industry leadership and how do you define the Montefiore difference?

Our values lead the way and help us attract and retain outstanding clinicians, educators, scientists, and administrators who are not just extraordinarily talented, but also driven by and devoted to our social justice mission.

Designing and implementing patient-centered models of care within the Bronx that challenge the status quo has been key to our success. With patients at the center of our work, we quickly recognized the importance of co-locating medical and psychiatric services to improve access and outcomes. Montefiore was one of the first organizations to integrate mental health expertise into primary care settings, and to add primary care into our mental health settings (reverse integration).

The Montefiore difference is not shying away from the most complicated healthcare challenges but embracing them using creativity and problem-solving to help the people who need us most. Our optimism, focus and passion move us forward and we are guided by the knowledge that public health is health, mental health is health, and every human being has a fundamental right to healthcare.

Will you provide an overview of your role and areas of focus?

I serve as the executive administrator in the Departments of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences and the Department of Medicine at Montefiore Health System. I work closely with my Chairs/physician partners and senior administrative leadership teams to advance the clinical, educational and research missions in these departments.

My work in clinical operations, human resource management, financial management, strategic planning, project management, and new program development empowers our team to do more and care more efficiently for the communities we serve. I work in partnership with our physician leaders to shape and move ideas from conception to implementation and evaluation.

The parts of my role that I enjoy the most include data-informed decision-making, mentoring high-potential individuals, problem-solving, and being surrounded by exceptionally smart and passionate people.

Will you discuss Montefiore's focus on expanding quality care across the Bronx, Westchester, Rockland, and Orange counties?

Montefiore's values define our philosophy of care and are at the heart of all we do. As an institution, we "double down" to improve the health and wealth in the communities we serve across the Bronx, Westchester, Rockland, and Orange counties. Having spent many years in different academic medical centers, I am so proud to be part of Montefiore and our commitment to serve diverse communities.

We are always looking for ways to improve access to quality care across our footprint. Recently, we obtained \$7 million in funding from the New York State Office of Mental Health and a designation as a Behavioral Health Center of Excellence. This program affords us the opportunity to develop new initiatives in



Montefiore Einstein Advanced Care – Westchester, New York

the Bronx and to improve transitions of care from our emergency rooms or inpatient units to community settings and expand critical outpatient services.

Ensuring all of those we serve, including traditionally under-resourced communities like the Bronx, have access to the latest treatments is at the center of all we do. As an example, we launched our first transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) program for treatment resistant depression at Montefiore Behavioral Health Center in the Bronx. We have also launched an intensive outpatient program for adolescents and a new behavioral health virtual urgent care.

In Westchester, many would travel to the city to access specialty expertise. At Montefiore Einstein Advanced Care (MEAC) in Elmsford, we added access to dermatology, behavioral health, allergy and immunology, weight management, and gastroenterology to name a few. Our Comprehensive Brain Health Center (CBHC) brings together experts to address the full range of brain and spine disorders including support for the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of these illnesses in adults and children.

Our continued innovation and expansion will further our reputation as a leading academic medical center with distinguished clinical specialty expertise, advanced research, and training that is poised to effectively serve our communities.

Will you highlight your focus on identifying new models of care and boosting recruitment and retention efforts to improve the patient experience and outcomes?

As part of our Behavioral Health Center of Excellence program, we will build additional support for hospitalized high-risk patients staffed by certified peers with lived mental health experience. Peers will meet patients prior to leaving the hospital and offer services like in-person support to accompany patients to appointments and help navigate medication refills. We expect this program will bolster outcomes for patients and reduce the chances of avoidable readmissions, which will safeguard capacity at the highest levels of care.

In Emergency Departments across the country, patients who require days or weeks of treatment for psychiatric illness face long wait times. To streamline the administrative steps needed to transfer a patient from the emergency department or medical floors into an open inpatient psychiatry bed, we implemented a huddle across locations. Daily communication across our multidisciplinary teams, data collection on acuity, presentation of priority patients, and revamped workflows means we can move our patients to the right level of care in a more timely and efficient manner.

As part of the planning stages for our future 21-bed child and adolescent inpatient psychiatry unit in the East Bronx, we are testing new compensation models including extensive investments in training and professional development to recruit staff.

To better serve children, adolescents, and their families, we are piloting extended hours of care for child psychiatrists and psychologists during evenings and weekends. We are working directly with our clinicians and patients to inform our approach and create a mutually beneficial model.

How important is it for Montefiore Health System to build a diverse and inclusive workforce to mirror the diversity of its patients and the communities it serves?

Delivering culturally attuned care requires Montefiore to train, build and retain a diverse workforce that is open to continuous learning. Our departments have robust Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Well-being Committees with membership across a variety of roles, identities, and religious and cultural backgrounds. DEI and Well-being Committees continue to inform departmental leadership and strategies to enhance systems that promote building a diverse and inclusive workforce. For example, we have refined our recruitment and promotion processes to ensure our committees represent the diversity in our communities. We offer providers relevant training and professional development opportunities, whether for learning a new language or attending a training on implicit bias.

It is of utmost importance to us to listen and learn, and to better understand the unique needs of our communities and ensure our teams and care reflects these needs.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in leadership roles in the industry?

Individuals with a strong work ethic, the ability to manage multiple, competing priorities, who lead with influence and empathy, and create structure around ambiguous problems tend to excel in this industry. In healthcare, there is immense opportunity for women with these skills and drive.

As a mom of two young children, I am deeply inspired by the female leaders at Montefiore and other major academic health systems; they succeed in roles of great responsibility both at home and work. Professional fulfillment for me includes having leaders and teammates I trust and admire, feeling empowered, interesting projects, growing high-potential teams, mentoring, and the opportunity to make an impact on people and our community.

Montefiore values families, excellence, and well-being and has offered the flexibility to embrace a “work-life integration” that I deeply value in this stage of my life. As the framework of the “work-day” becomes more flexible, and technology moves forward, people can contribute fully at different times of the day and week. I have been able to show up for my family in ways I had not anticipated, while still being present, energized and stimulated by my career. With more autonomy, and flexibility, I am a fuller parent, professional and human being. For these reasons, this industry is well-suited for women to excel as leaders in the right organization.

Did you know at an early age that you had a passion to work in healthcare and what has made the industry so special for you?

I grew up in a family of hospitality entrepreneurs who emigrated from Uganda and Pakistan to evade challenging social and political circumstances. My father often told me that I could choose to be anything I wanted, but only if I aspired to be the very best.

As a young person, I spent time at our family motel business in London, Ontario. One of my “projects” was developing partnerships with our local hospital system to allow patients and their families discounted room rates for longer stays, offering comfortable spaces to rest as they supported loved ones. Together, my grandmother “Mama Velji” and I would set up coffee and breakfast in the mornings and add welcoming touches to their rooms to offer them comfort.

After college, I worked in pharmaceutical/medical devices consulting and realized I wanted a career at the intersection of healthcare and business administration. I pursued my Master in Public Health with a focus in healthcare management at the Yale School of Public Health and my Master in Business Administration at the Yale School of Management. Following my Administrative Fellowship at the Cleveland Clinic, I worked across several academic medical centers, learning the true impact of excellence in hospital administration from role models and this became my career goal.

This industry has been so special for me, from my time in Ontario when I started working with hospitals at my family’s motel, to interacting with administrators and physician leaders who embody excellence. I believe there is great opportunity for integrating established business concepts more effectively in the healthcare setting. At Montefiore, we aspire to create a future where data-driven decision-making, results-oriented project management and talent management concepts become a natural part of our day-to-day experience in healthcare.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in healthcare administration?

My advice for young people interested in pursuing a career in healthcare administration is to:

1. Develop a strong analytical foundation – to be an effective healthcare administrator, you need to understand the current state before embarking on projects that aim to make an impact clinically, operationally, and/or financially. Understanding data is essential as it drives accountability, performance improvement and provides you and your team direction and credibility.
2. Learn about all branches and stakeholders in healthcare – this includes, but is not limited to, providers, insurance companies, state and federal governments, pharmaceutical/medical device companies, and startups. Next, understand how the system works differently in various regions and appreciate the importance of each stakeholder in the broader system.
3. Follow-up and follow-through – there is no task too big or small for a healthcare administrator. You will often create structure around ambiguous problems, identify the key steps and stakeholders for designing the right solution, and be responsible for bringing these programs and projects to completion.
4. Work for and alongside people who care about and inspire you – healthcare is a complex field with many opportunities and challenges – your physician partner, colleagues, and managers can single-handedly transform your day-to-day experience and your career. ●