

Serving the Underserved: A Leadership Profile of Dr. Lauren Hughes, Deputy Secretary of Innovation at the Pennsylvania Department of Health

Melissa Fernandez 20 April 2016

A family practitioner with a keen professional and academic focus on public policy and population health, Dr. Lauren Hughes recently attained an immeasurable opportunity to effect substantive change for Pennsylvania residents when she was named the Deputy Secretary for Health Innovation at the Department of Health last year. Dr. Hughes and her team are poised to lead the state in innovative models to address not only access to high-quality healthcare, but also ensure that everyone, including the most vulnerable, have the resources to combat the many challenges that routinely impede healthy outcomes.

Prior to assuming her role at the Department of Health, Dr. Hughes was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholar at the University of Michigan and served as the national president of the American Medical Student

Association prior to completing her residency. She holds a medical degree from the University of Iowa, an MPH in health policy from The George Washington University and degrees in Spanish and Zoology from Iowa State University.

Dr. Hughes has been a longtime advocate for expanded access to high-quality healthcare for underserved communities and has demonstrated this not only as a public health official, but through direct service. While volunteering for AmeriCorps, Dr. Hughes worked to enroll low-income children and families in health insurance at a federally qualified health center, which is a type of healthcare facility designed to provide comprehensive medical care regardless of a patient's ability to pay. This experience provided Dr. Hughes with a personal perspective and understanding of the situations of so many vulnerable patients and working in public policy now gives Dr. Hughes the chance to not only address their medical needs, but improve their overall lives.

"I've always been interested in the different policy levers, particularly, how you change those in order to make a difference." says Dr. Hughes of what draws her to population health. "But to make that difference, we have to think of all of the other social factors that impact health beyond just the acquisition of healthcare services."

What Dr. Hughes is referring to are the so-called social determinants of health, the socioeconomic factors that

impact one's ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle and include housing, education and transportation, among others. When asked her opinion of the single greatest social challenge that impedes health for vulnerable communities, Dr. Hughes doesn't hesitate to answer the area in which she is most concerned: Lack of safe and quality housing.

"Housing is a healthcare issue. Housing provides a safe space free from violence, a place to store food and medicines, and an address to call one's own that is helpful when applying for jobs."

Housing is one of the many social determinants that can affect healthcare outcomes. In fact, Dr. Hughes asserts that only 10% of the time does lack of access to healthcare services impact mortality, showing how important it is to consider social determinants when considering health policy. Dr. Hughes and other advocates for new approaches to remedying health inequity hope that by focusing on external environmental and socioeconomic factors such as housing, we can improve people's health behaviors which will lead to sustainable positive health outcomes.

Dr. Hughes stresses that to be successful as policymakers and implementers, it is so important for those in leadership to work together and be open to forming new partnerships among those that share the same vision. She mentions how common it is for those within the public and

social sectors to work in silos, but innovation requires being open to new ways of thinking and a willingness to change if a new strategy could bring better results.

Innovation also requires not being afraid to make mistakes. "I often ask myself, at the end of my service, how will I know if I have been successful and if what I've done has made a difference? I think the answer is that I will know this if I have failed at least a handful of times because that means that I've tried new things and that is the heart of innovation."

Of leadership, Dr. Hughes notes the importance of the examples set by many of the leaders she has admired throughout her career, which include other physicians she has worked alongside, as well as public officials. She notes the significance of mentorship in developing future leaders, and particularly how important it is for current leaders to be good articulators of their visions with a responsibility to see ideas through to fruition.

With nine months under her belt at the Department of Health, Dr. Hughes notes that she and her team are embedded in the planning stages of many developments and that there are a lot of exciting initiatives on the horizon for Pennsylvania focusing on quality primary care and all of the factors that contribute to healthy outcomes. With an unwavering passion for serving the underserved and a mind open to new ideas, Dr. Hughes is a leader who can truly innovate the Pennsylvania health landscape,

ensuring that everyone not only has access to quality care to achieve good health, but that they have the resources in place to maintain it.