

# CEO'S CORNER

A MESSAGE FROM CHANDRA

***“Founded on the belief that all human beings have a basic right to healthcare, our mission is to provide a full range of health and wellness services to all who walk through our doors. Committed to assuring access to affordable, quality healthcare for the underserved, underinsured and uninsured population, we treat each person with respect, dignity and compassion regardless of age, gender, race religion, circumstances or ability to pay. We envision a community where all people have equal access to quality healthcare, fostering an environment for healthier, happier and more productive citizens.”***



As you know, the above statement is our Mission and Purpose. Recently, in moments of reflection, I realized that 2019 marked my fifth year of serving as your CEO. These last five years have been filled with many blessings, successes and challenges. We have re-branded and re-named ourselves, moved into a new main service delivery site and each year set new records on the number of patients we serve. Although we continue to celebrate in our successes, this past year I began to notice a shift in our mindset and what began to feel like a disconnect from our Mission and Purpose.

Over 54 years ago while the Civil Rights movement was in full swing, a physician named Dr. Jack Geiger secured funding from President Johnson’s “War on Poverty” to support two pilot programs focused on access to healthcare (one in Boston, Massachusetts and another in Mt. Bayou, Mississippi). In Mississippi, Dr. Geiger went to a predominately African American town that was made up of sharecroppers who were living in extreme poverty and where children were dying from malnutrition. He and nurses went to Mississippi to not only bring access to healthcare but to go into the homes and provide education and support to the community. What ensued was a movement in which the community banded together to not only support healthcare but to address social and health disparities.

Together they installed wells so that families could have access to clean drinking water, they established a community garden so that the sharecroppers whose job was to grow fresh fruits and vegetables could have access for themselves, they installed screened doors and windows to allow air to flow through their homes during those hot southern summers and keep the bugs at bay. Dr. Geiger realized their health program was more than a clinic, and it needed to be run and managed by the community. They established a Board of Directors made up of the citizens. That is why to this very day it is a HRSA mandate that over 51% of a Federally Qualified Health Center’s Board of Directors are patients.

Our Father of FQHCs – Dr. Jack Geiger was Dr. Martin Luther King’s personal physician. He stood by and marched with him in Selma, and was the physician who saved long time Georgia Congressman John Lewis’ life after he was attacked during the march. Dr. Geiger is the founding member and past president of Physicians for Human Rights and Physicians for Social Responsibility. Although Dr. Geiger is in his 90s, what started over 50 years ago with two pilot programs remains today; FQHCs are now caring for more than 26 million Americans, and our network continues to grow!

As we embark upon not only a new year but a new decade, let us not forget the history of those legends that have gone before us to pave a way for all to experience access. Even though the Civil Rights Movement was more than fifty years ago, the social and health equities that were prevalent then continue to exist and thrive today. I ask that as an organization, we honor our history and begin a fresh start in a new decade to not only reconnect to our Purpose, but to stand upon a platform built by our Mission and Values, to demonstrate to our communities *and* to each other what treating all “regardless of” looks like.

Be Safe and Be Well,

Chandra Smiley, MSW  
Chief Executive Officer