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conversation

with
Donna Rey, Ed.D.

Donna Rey, Ed.D., seems to have been destined for her job as the executive director of the 1199SEIU Benefit and Pension Funds in New York City and chief executive officer for the entire family of funds' administrative operations. The Brooklyn, New York native was born in a hospital that employed Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199 members, and her own father was a Local 1199 member for 35 years.

The 1199SEIU Funds provide benefits for 450,000 lives and spend more than \$1 billion annually on pension payments and \$2 billion annually on health benefits for members, who are frontline caregivers in hospitals, nursing homes, home care, clinics and all other areas of the health care industry. 1199SEIU Funds also include training and child-care funds. Rey holds an Ed.D. from Columbia University, and her career includes leadership positions with the City of New York and Columbia University, among other organizations. She discussed her career path and the significance of being a Black woman in this field with editor Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS.



Donna Rey, Ed.D.
Executive Director and
Chief Executive Officer,
1199SEIU Benefit and
Pension Funds,
New York, New York

Your background includes stints in city government, higher education and a nonprofit. What drew you to a multiemployer benefit fund?

In 2006, I was contacted by a recruiter for a position that was not a fit. The recruiter recognized that the skills and background I had were exactly what the 1199SEIU Funds were looking for and—without asking me—immediately scheduled an interview with the then-executive director.

My career path included managing massive change at organizations, so it almost didn't matter the industry because of the way I approached the work. I hadn't worked in a benefit fund, although I had managed benefits as part of my human resources (HR) responsibilities. While I had the leadership and management skills for the job, I also had the life experience to make it a good fit.

My dad was an 1199SEIU member. He worked in the hospital system for 35 years until he retired, so I knew firsthand the value that 1199 brought to hospital workers and working people throughout New York City. Given what I

knew and the chance to use my skills to support 1199 members, I jumped at the opportunity.

I started out as chief administrative officer and moved up to chief operating officer and then associate executive director before becoming executive director in 2021.

Describe some of your accomplishments at the fund.

The benefit, pension, training and child-care funds had separate administrations when I came in, so the charge was to centralize and streamline those processes and create an administrative structure that would support the growth of the funds across New York, Massachusetts and Florida. We've consolidated member eligibility, contributions and benefit payments for all of the funds into one system, which allows the trustees to have a single view of fund finances.

We've focused on the member experience, including how they access our services and the communications we send to them. When I got here, there were 15-20 different phone numbers that members used to reach the funds. We worked with the staff and leadership to narrow the phone

numbers down to three, with one each dedicated to active members, retirees and health care providers. That required retraining staff so that they were equipped to respond to the members through that lens. We make sure that our communications are clear and direct and that they don't have a lot of legalese and inside baseball talk.

We also really value our staff. For example, when the outsourcing of benefits for our home care workers meant we would have to eliminate 80 positions from the staff, we were determined not to lay anyone off. We were intentional about assessing staff skills and matching skills with positions in other parts of the organization and, in the end, we did not lay anyone off as a result of that change in practice.

Cost savings have been another important part of my role. Between 2004 and August of 2021, the fund has saved \$4.5 billion on the benefits side and spent \$54 million less on administration. We take that seriously. Every dollar saved is a dollar that potentially goes back into the members' pockets or a resource to management and the union for the members.

What are your goals for your new position?

We want to continue to provide ease of access to the best quality health care to our members in an efficient way. Where we will push the envelope is to move into disease management and to look at how we can support our members to help them lead healthier lives. Our members have the best benefits around and don't have the typical barriers to good health because they don't

have premium payments or any point-of-service payments for in-network care. Yet, they still suffer from health issues that could be better managed. We're focused on providing support to address barriers such as social determinants and health disparities that may be preventing improved health outcomes. Our three areas of focus in this effort are prevention efforts, women's health and mental health.

For example, I've been discussing with our providers the power dynamic in the doctor-patient relationship. We often view doctors as being in a position of authority, and how we deal with and interact with authority in this culture does not always benefit the patient. We have heard more and more stories of women, particularly women of color, who feel they are not heard when dealing with doctors and in emergency situations. It's important to break down these barriers and build a relationship of trust. We want to get to a place where the medical profession is responding in a way that shows they've heard their patients. We are continuing to raise awareness on this issue.

Members are catching up on their routine health maintenance activities, and we need to make sure that they are getting screenings and checkups. We're focused on prevention, making sure that members can access their benefits.

We're also working with providers to think about how to provide health care differently. The use of telehealth has increased tremendously by necessity. I think we should continue to explore what that means for bringing health care to the patient—maybe

looking at how the health care system gets to go to the patient. There are lots of opportunities there.

We have seen an increase in the use of our mental health services, particularly through telehealth. We are focused on making sure that we have a diverse set of clinicians who include people of color and women of color—and even have faith-based services available to our members. We want to be sure our providers reflect our members. We're really focused on how we can provide the most diverse set of resources to enable our members to feel as though they can trust the person on the other end of the phone and connect in terms of values and what's important to them.

You are likely one of the first Black women to lead a large multiemployer benefit fund. Describe the significance of this accomplishment.

I'm honored to be in this role. Being in this role reflects the culmination of all my personal and professional experiences. Who I am, as a Black woman of faith in particular, is brought to bear in this moment. It's important for Black women to hold leadership roles in both public and private sectors, reflecting the communities and the people we serve and the people we work with.

Diversity in leadership often facilitates diversity in ideas and perspectives that might not otherwise be heard and respected or have space made for. We know that there's richness in diverse thinking. Individuals and teams are more effective and more

successful with diverse ideas and when diverse values are respected. Processes are going to be more inclusive, and good and fruitful outcomes are probably more likely.

I understand how racism and sexism have an impact on one's life, and I'm informed by my education and experience as a Black woman who accesses health care.

What are the challenges for the fund?

I think our fund is unique because of COVID. We support the heroes of our time, which means our members have been on the front line battling the pandemic and risking their own lives and the lives of their families to take care of those who have fallen ill. In addition to the physical crisis that we face, I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the racial unrest that has piled on top of that during the past two years. We must make sure that we continue to support our members holistically from a physical perspective and from a mental health perspective and think about the social determinants of health that may prevent them from being their healthiest selves. There must be a greater sensitivity to those elements during this time.



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