

Philanthropy Profile

Interview conducted by Kaitlin Ugolik Phillips

A Conversation with Tom Lawrence, President & CEO of The Leon Levine Foundation

The Leon Levine Foundation provides funding to health care, human services, and education nonprofits throughout North and South Carolina, with a focus on supporting self-reliance and Jewish values. The *North Carolina Medical Journal* sat down with President & CEO Tom Lawrence to learn how the Foundation is addressing health disparities.

Introduction

Two decades after founding the Family Dollar Stores chain outside Charlotte, North Carolina, Leon Levine established The Leon Levine Foundation to reinvest in the communities that had made the business successful. One of the Foundation's first investments was the development of Shalom Park in Charlotte, which was established as a gathering place for members of Jewish synagogues throughout the region. Levine, who focused his energies on the Foundation after retiring as CEO and Chairman Emeritus of Family Dollar, died in April 2023.

The Foundation has focused on funding nonprofits in the health care, human services, and education sectors. Its health care mission area invests in nonprofits providing direct care, supportive services, care coordination, and case management, with the goal of providing equitable access to care and helping patients achieve better health outcomes. North Carolina grantees include Cape Fear Clinic, Inc., El Futuro, Community Care Center of Forsyth County, Family Service of the Piedmont, Henderson County Free Medical Clinic, and many more.

Tom Lawrence, who formerly worked in family wealth planning in Virginia and North Carolina, became the first full-time employee of The Leon Levine Foundation in 2002. Lawrence initially oversaw investments and tax compliance for the Levine family and the Foundation, and he became

Vice President of the Foundation in 2012 before becoming President and CEO in 2023. In this role, Lawrence directs the staff, program, and administrative activities of the Foundation and works closely with the Board of Directors, of which he is a member, on strategic development. Here Lawrence discusses the work of The Leon Levine Foundation with regard to health equity now and in the future.

NCMJ: Who was Leon Levine, and how did The Leon Levine Foundation come to be?

Tom Lawrence: Leon Levine was the founder of Family Dollar Stores. His business was built around helping customers who were working to make ends meet by giving them everyday low prices. Many became repeat and loyal customers, which built Family Dollar into a Fortune 500 company. When Mr. Levine retired in 2003, there were over 4,500 stores across most states. Upon his retirement, Mr. Levine began his second career in philanthropy through The Leon Levine Foundation, which he had established in 1980. He wanted to give back to those who had helped make him successful. The Foundation focuses on individuals and families in poverty in North and South Carolina who are working toward self-sufficiency, through investments in education, health care, and human services. He also wanted to focus on strengthening the Jewish community. Because the Carolinas were his home and the launchpad of his business, that's where the Foundation focuses geographically.

Electronically published January 8, 2024.

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NC Med J. 2024;85(1):55-56. ©2024 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2024/85118

NCMJ: How have you seen The Leon Levine Foundation's priorities evolve regarding health care and human services during your tenure?

Lawrence: I'll start with a constant: that of finding ways to invest in organizations that directly serve the Family Dollar customer, who is often underinsured, to meet their medical needs in a way that promotes their own path to self-sufficiency. Our Foundation's geographic focus is the Carolinas, and unfortunately needs are significant across both states. For this reason, we've intentionally expanded beyond the Charlotte/Mecklenburg region to help folks across both North and South Carolina. In Eastern North Carolina, we support the Service Learning Center Patient Care Funds of the ECU School of Dental Medicine and in the west we added a new grantee in fiscal year 2023 that provides free cleaning, emergency, and restorative services called Blue Ridge Free Dental Clinic. In Rockingham County, we support Samaritan Colony, a residential substance use treatment center in Mr. Levine's hometown, helping fund the addition of a 14-bed facility for women. In Durham, we support El Futuro, a nonprofit outpatient mental health clinic for Latinx families.

Additionally, the giving strategy of the health care mission area has evolved substantially. We started with free and charitable clinics, the most obvious care providers for the poor and uninsured, and now we support 32 clinics across the Carolinas. We added important organizations that also support these clinics, such as pharmacy, dental care, and behavioral health care. We fund Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), where on average 40% of their patients are uninsured, and added AccessHealth NC networks to help patients understand and reach these critical health care resources. We most recently began to add larger health care systems, which have community health clinics and outreach to help this population.

NCMJ: Your website lists one lesson learned over the years of grantmaking is that "ease of access to quality care can transform a community." Can you elaborate on this, and give any examples?

Lawrence: There are many examples where an

initiative that started off as a way to help people access basic health care has grown into a community effort among many agencies to address medical and social determinants of health in a collaborative fashion. Cone Health in Greensboro, with its focus on community care and mobile clinics, pairs medical services with extensive case management and patient navigation services to help people learn about and access local services. Kintegra Health in Gastonia now deploys over 100 licensed behavioral health providers in 43 school sites to provide critical access to youth with mental health needs. Kintegra also provides early intervention and guidance to redirect the downward spiral of untreated mental health needs that would otherwise grow to stress the entire community. A smaller clinic, Good Samaritan Clinic in Morganton, provides access to medical care, dental care, mental health counseling, and medications to 1,650 patients. Its Farmworkers Outreach program has started a Navigating the Neighborhood program, connecting almost 70% of patients to a growing network of community partners to address social determinants of health.

NCMJ: What is the biggest challenge you see in the health care mission area over the next five years?

Lawrence: One of the most challenging issues our health care mission area will face in the next five years is helping to address the mental health crisis across the Carolinas in a comprehensive and collaborative way, particularly the crisis in children. We are currently meeting with other funders, providers, government, and insurance networks to develop a response.

NCMJ: Is there anything else you want practitioners and policymakers to know about the Foundation's work?

Lawrence: The needs are great, and we have a lot to learn in this space. We look forward to partnering and learning from the many experts and professionals in health care across the Carolinas and beyond as we continue our journey. We're humbled and thankful for the amount of effort, professionalism, and dedication given by the amazing nonprofit teams in our region to help create equity in health care. NCMJ