

# School of Public Health & Health Services

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*The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services Web Site*

## **“A Passionate Gift”**

Community health centers have come a long way since Julio Bellber, president and CEO of the RCHN Community Health Foundation (RCHN CHF), first began working to transform them into the high-quality health care delivery systems they are today.

“When we first started over 40 years ago, it was a different world,” he says. “Today, health centers provide the type of care that I believe should be available to everyone.”

But despite their incredible growth, community health centers still have work to do to reduce health care disparities and support a growing number of increasingly complex patients.

So Bellber and his foundation are investing in the future. In partnership with the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services (SPHHS), RCHN CHF recently announced the creation of the Julio Bellber Fellowship in Community Health Policy Research.

The fellowship, which is supported by a generous gift from RCHN CHF to SPHHS’s Geiger Gibson Program in Community Health Policy, aims to develop the next generation of scholars dedicated to the health center mission: improving the health and health care of populations most at risk for disparate treatment and outcomes.

“Investment in advanced training is a critical element in the development of policy research expertise in community health centers and medically underserved populations,” says Sara Rosenbaum, J.D., Harold and Jane Hirsh Professor of Health Law and Policy at SPHHS. “The Bellber Fellowship will help create a new generation of scholars in this vital area of health policy.”

Adds Bellber: “Training a cadre of researchers and scholars who will be focused on community

health centers is critical. If we're going to grow, we have to get people interested in the health center story, and engage them in telling it. We need to nurture the talent of our communities, our doctors, and our scholars."

For Bellber, the community health center story traces back to his youth. At age 10, he and his family moved from Puerto Rico to New York City, where they settled into a working class, immigrant community and depended on the traditional delivery system for health care services. Even at a young age, "I thought there was a better way to do things," he remembers.

So Bellber decided to do something. He decided to work to change the system

As a young adult, Bellber went to work at St. Luke's Hospital in Manhattan's Upper West Side, where he was quickly recognized for his intelligence and drive. In 1967, when the hospital opened one of the nation's first neighborhood health clinics funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity, Bellber was recruited to join the team as the medical records coordinator.

But he didn't stop there, working diligently to help the health center gain its footing in the community. Ten years later, in 1977, the health clinic was spun out of the hospital and became a free-standing community health center, and renamed the William F. Ryan Community Health Center. Just two years later, the Board of Directors had appointed Bellber as the center's executive director.

"At that time," he says, "the health center was a struggling, store-front organization with a very small budget and a very large deficit."

But under Bellber's leadership, the Ryan Center prevailed and grew. In an unprecedented move for health centers nationwide, he and the center's board of directors, comprised of advocates and community members, negotiated with a private lending institution to obtain bank financing for a new building, which opened in 1988.

That same year, at the request of the New York State Attorneys General, the Ryan Center acquired under receivership a struggling center on Manhattan's Lower East Side called the NENA Comprehensive Health Council. It became a Ryan satellite and soon, Bellber and the board had developed a turn-around plan for NENA.

"There was a huge need in that area, but a combination of financial problems and community politics prevented the health center from running effectively," explains Bellber. "As an organization from outside the neighborhood, with no immediate local political ties, we expanded the platform that had been built uptown and used it to bring high-quality care to the Lower East Side community."

And because good things come in threes, the Ryan Center joined with other health centers in 1988 to establish one of the first health center-sponsored managed care plans, then known as the Manhattan Prepaid Health Services Plan and later renamed CenterCare. The Ryan Center

soon became nationally recognized as a model of accessible, culturally competent, and comprehensive primary care.

In 2001, Bellber spearheaded the development of a new center, the Ryan/Chelsea-Clinton Community Health Center, successfully expanding the Ryan model of care to the mid-west side of Manhattan. By 2004, the Ryan Community Health Network (RCHN), which included the managed care plan, three health centers with multiple service sites, and a comprehensive management services organization to plan and manage development, had become the largest community health center network in the state of New York.

“The growth of the Ryan Network would not have been possible without the vision and tenacity of the Board of Directors,” says Bellber.

Meanwhile, Bellber was determined to help and support other health centers across the country. The opportunity to do so in a big way presented itself in 2005, when CenterCare was sold.

“Our board decided that the insurance business was no longer essential to our mission, and we wanted to focus on helping health centers nationally and supporting their efforts to provide excellent care.” Bellber says.

With the proceeds of the sale, they established the RCHN CHF, the only not-for profit health care foundation in the country dedicated solely to community health centers.

“There are a lot of great philanthropies out there, supporting significant work in health care policy and delivery,” says Feygele Jacobs, the Foundation’s executive vice president and chief operating officer. “But what’s unique about our organization is that we’re the only foundation in the country that has a national platform explicitly focused on addressing community health center and safety net issues.”

Since its establishment in 2005, the foundation has flourished, as is typical of Bellber’s ventures. Through strategic investments and partnerships in research, education, and coalition building, RCHN CHF focuses on issues that are critical to all community health centers, including health care access, health center stability, and health information technology. The Foundation brings Bellber’s Midas-like touch to a broader base, and helps to spread the word that the health center model works.

“Community health centers are an excellent model,” believes Bellber. “They are efficient, they are affordable, and they provide excellent care.”

The Julio Bellber Fellowship in Community Health Policy Research is only the latest effort in a partnership between the foundation and SPHHS that began in 2007 with a \$2 million gift to the school’s Geiger Gibson Program in Community Health Policy, which is housed in the Department of Health Policy. The contribution — the largest ever made to SPHHS — funded the establishment of the Geiger Gibson/RCHN Community Health Foundation Research

Collaborative, a comprehensive academic and research initiative focused on community health centers.

The original grant was followed by several smaller grants and, in 2011, the Foundation announced a new gift of \$1.75 million to SPHHS's Department of Health Policy. The Collaborative has been extremely productive, developing policy briefs and helping to focus research on health center issues. For nearly every dollar invested by the foundation, the collaborative has secured an additional four.

"Thanks to RCHN-CHF's incredible generosity, the Research Collaborative has produced more than 30 important policy briefs, supported more than a dozen masters' students, and raised the profile of community health centers everywhere," says Rosenbaum. "We are lucky to partner with such a supportive and successful foundation whose vision for the future of health care matches our own."

Through the Julio Bellber Fellowship in Community Health Policy, that vision will be kept alive by the next generation of scholars who will carry on more than Bellber's name and his mission to support high-quality, affordable health care for those who need it most. They will also possess a trait Bellber sees in himself: passion.

"I want to see passion, hunger, eagerness, willingness, hard work. I want to see something happen, I want to see it done now," says Bellber. "I grew up in this environment, working with people, and focusing on my community. I'm here because I have a passion for this work, and I want to pass that passion on."