

How to Fix a Broken Health Care System

It's rare to hear an insurance company executive describe the health care system as broken. But Colleen Briggs '06 does.

"Unaffordable care continues to undermine our purpose to improve health for all," Briggs, the vice president of corporate responsibility at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, posted on social media in August. "Families are forced to choose between medicine and rent. Patients are skipping care because they can't afford copays. Nonprofits are stretched thin trying to fill the gaps left by a broken system."

For nearly two decades, Briggs has worked at the intersection of business and social impact, advising legislators on economic policy and urging companies to invest in solutions to financial insecurity and community health. In July, she added a new role to her name plate: president of the Blue Cross NC Foundation, one of the state's largest charitable organizations. Blue Cross NC provides the foundation with its funding as well as advisory services and access to data that informs the foundation's work. She now directs tens of millions of dollars in annual grants toward initiatives to improve health outcomes and address systemic inequities across North Carolina.

Her belief in aligning private capital with public good has roots at Carolina, where she studied political science and now teaches public policy as an adjunct professor.

In August, the *Review* sat down with Briggs, a sixth-generation North Carolinian, to talk about what it takes to tackle big societal issues while working within an industry built on profit. The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

What lessons are you taking from your role as VP of corporate responsibility into your new position as the foundation's president?

We went on this listening tour in all 100 counties, and we asked communities, "What do you think are the biggest issues, and what role can Blue Cross NC play to help address them?" It didn't matter which county we were in; we heard consistent themes. The first was around youth behavioral health. The second was around improving health through food. And the third was around extending access to care.

Communities are expecting more than just philanthropy. Sure, they want to see those investments, but they also want to see how we can bring our services, our data and our expertise to help move the needle on these pervasive problems.

You're outspoken about how fractured the health care system is in the United States. What's your perspective about corporate responsibility in this arena?

It's part of why I love working at Blue Cross NC. We are a fully-taxed, not-for-profit company that has a clear mission to improve health for all. That's our north star. My job is to figure out how to fulfill that mission with clear accountability.

Health care is fundamentally broken. We spend \$5 trillion a year on health care, yet we have some of the worst health out-

comes of any wealthy nation. In North Carolina, we spend \$94 billion on health care, which is 16 percent of our GDP, and yet we have one of the most expensive premiums for families. That shows the system is not working.

Blue Cross is committed to saying, "What can we do to help fix this?" We know we can't do it alone, but we're going to stand with our nonprofits [that] are facing one of the most challenging external environments, and we're going to give them funding and technical assistance.

How can your foundation make progress toward those goals?

One issue is youth mental health. In the majority of counties, there are no mental health resources, so there's nowhere for children to go, and as a result, they're forced [into] emergency rooms or other high-cost care [facilities]. This leads to worse health outcomes, and it costs the entire health care system more. That's what sparked us to say we are going to bring the full resources of our company to help address this challenge.

So, we did it in three ways. We invested in prevention, things like expanding youth mental health training to as many of our employees and community partners as we can. Second, we asked, "How can we increase access to treatment?" We changed our reimbursement policy so that children could get mental health resources in school settings, [where] they're six times more likely to accept that care. Third, we thought about how to address community conditions that lead to these problems in the first place. We've started to invest in nonprofits across the state that address the upstream issues.

How does your status as a Tar Heel influence those partnerships with these institutions across the state?

My parents were both Tar Heels. It is deeply rooted in me to be a Tar Heel, and it's the commitment to public service that's been embedded in me. Both of my

parents were very deeply committed to public service, and that's part of what drew me to UNC.

Are there specific examples of UNC research informing your organization's work?

UNC has been a leader [in] researching the prevalence of diet-related chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and high cholesterol, which are costing the state billions of dollars. We spend [approximately] \$65 billion on these issues, yet we know if we invest in preventative care — helping people eat healthier, getting them access to healthy food — we can change the trajectory of those issues.

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We're launching a new initiative that focuses on improving access to healthy food. First, we're going to help individuals have healthier behaviors through teaching kitchens and our retail centers. Second, we're scaling food-as-medicine through the health care system. We're one of the only payers in the country that offer our members nutrition benefits, as well as a coach to help [people] control type 2 diabetes, and we've seen huge [positive] health outcomes. People are healthier, but it also saves the system a lot of money. Third, we know not every community has equal access to healthy food, so we're working with farmers to be part of food hubs to

make sure everyone, regardless of where they live, can have healthy food.

How does your background as a student and now a professor at Carolina inform your approach?

UNC gives you a really broad understanding of the policy environment. It forces you to take a critical view of all the factors influencing the challenges we see in our communities. No one sector is going to solve these issues. They're way too big. The private sector can't solve them alone. Policy can't solve them. The nonprofit sector can't solve them. So, we really have to think about more collaborative solutions.

What experiences do you bring from your profession into the classroom?

There's the academic view of how things should work. But then there's the reality. It's not a linear path for social change. I tell students how someone sitting in this seat has to think about trade-offs. Whenever I'm teaching, I try to bring in people from my network so students can hear a lot of different views and real examples of how we try to change social systems. Part of why I love working with students is they challenge my thinking. They often push me to think differently about an issue.

As a student, which experiences set you on your path?

I loved that UNC exposed me to so many subjects that I had no exposure to growing up — intro to jazz, art history and all these issues. I went in thinking I was going to be a chemistry and math major. It taught me to have more curiosity and to understand problem-solving in a different way.

I fell in love with policy work. I got to learn about the formation of the constitution in South Africa, and I still think about the fascinating conversations and debates I got to be part of.

What advice would you give to students who might pursue this kind of work?

The first thing is there's no linear path. Don't feel as though you have to follow specific steps to get where you want to go. Make sure you stay informed and you have a very broad perspective on what's happening in communities. Also, try to get exposure to different sectors. I've now worked in nonprofits, in the public sector and in the private sector, and that's been really valuable. Nonprofits really understand local solutions. Policy can help us scale that to ensure lasting change. The private sector can help innovate quickly.

As we look ahead, what do you hope will come of your work?

The dream is to live in a state where everyone, regardless of where you live, is able to live a healthy life. I think we could do that in a generation if we bring together the private sector, the public sector and nonprofits.

— Ira Wilder '24

CAROLINA ALUMNI/IRA WILDER '24