

Making a Difference

Health in the Community

An Interview with Mark Wagar, President and Chief Executive Officer, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield



EDITORS' NOTE In his current post since November 2006, New York-based Mark Wagar formerly served as Senior Vice President of the WellPoint Inc. subsidiary, Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield. A 34-year veteran of health care services, Wagar has held leadership roles at a variety of health benefit organizations, including Caremark, CIGNA HealthCare, AmiCare, and Emerald Health Network, as well as with the provider community, fulfilling roles in hospital management, physician practice management, and diagnostic services.



Mark Wagar

COMPANY BRIEF Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield (www.empireblue.com), the largest health insurer in New York State based on its preferred provider organization (PPO) and health maintenance organization (HMO) membership of over five million, is a subsidiary of WellPoint, Inc. Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield (Empire) is the trade name of Empire HealthChoice Assurance, Inc., and Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield HMO is the trade name of Empire HealthChoice HMO, Inc., independent licensees of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association.

In the realm of corporate citizenship, there are so many needs out there. How does Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield choose where to focus its resources?

While Empire and our associates participate in a variety of social responsibility programs and community events, we try to focus most of our attention and resources on things that will change and improve the health status of not only our members and their families, but for all those who reside in the state of New York. This focus is guided in part by our new Member and State Health Index which helps us identify the most critical health care needs in the state and allows us to have a measurable and sustainable impact in the communities we serve.

There are 23 indexes in total that we look at in our community engagements. As a good example of the New York health measures, Empire is focused on reducing the number of low-birth-weight infants and encouraging young women of child-bearing age to engage with a gynecologist/obstetrician early on. Additionally, we look at less complex issues, such as immunization, which can have a great impact on the

health status for at-risk populations, including the elderly and the young.

To address the unacceptable level of death rates from heart disease in New York, we are also working to improve levels of smoking cessation and to promote increased physical activity, which cuts across almost every significant health issue in our community. Our physical activity focus also has an impact on another priority area: the rampant increase in type 2 diabetes in adults, young and old alike.

Empire Blue Cross Blue Shield directly supports many community health causes directly, and our associates throughout New York will personally donate over \$1 million to community organizations through our 2008 Associates Annual Giving Campaign.

To be successful in this work, do you need to collaborate with nonprofit organizations and other experts in these areas?

Nonprofits are essential for success, because they'll often be embedded in a community location. They may already be addressing a particular community or health issue very proactively. They frequently spring up because of a particular need, so they tend to have close relationships with the population in a given part of our service area or among a particular ethnic group.

Additionally, we have reached out to many diverse community organizations to bring health improvement messages to local boroughs and communities in a more effective manner. This includes working with local schools on health, wellness, and exercise programs; community health centers familiar with populations at greater risk; and partnering with various established city and state initiatives already underway.

Is it important to have the metrics in place to be able to review your progress in the corporate citizenship arena?

You have to run your community involvement just like your business: identify needs, prioritize them, commit the resources, be clear about what success will look like, and then track it. This is a decade-long endeavor and we want the effort to help people. For instance, there are various public databases that have baselines for the relative incidence level of diabetes. We can also look at the levels of severity among our members and work with their physicians and other health care providers to see if we are able

to reduce the severity of their disease through both individual and community efforts.

Just making resources available is not enough. Tracking the results through our Member and State Health Index programs can help fine-tune how the resources are used to get the most impact for the community.

Public perception doesn't always match the actual good being done by companies and their employees. Is that frustrating sometimes?

Yes, it can be frustrating. But the headline is not what Empire is after; it's the health improvement that is important. Unfortunately, most often the negative stories in the media generate the most readers, watchers, or listeners. In the long run, if you're present in their community, people will judge you based on what they see your organization do. Real community involvement and impact is the only real antidote for an overdose of negative coverage of other issues.

For you, personally, is it critical to set the tone at the top and lead by example?

People react when they see the leaders in their organization commit to a cause. You can not garner support if you just write a memo to your staff telling them that something is important and that you'd like for them to pay attention and participate. I've had many associates come up to me and say that they noticed I was at a community event or spoke out for a particular cause or issue. It can be a refreshing surprise for them to have the chance to learn that you're a regular person and that you are personally committed to the efforts you promote.

You have more than 30 years in the health care services industry. Early on, could you have imagined that you would spend your career in this industry?

I'm here because I did imagine that, almost 40 years ago. It started with my desire to make a difference. I wanted to follow a path that would allow me to help someone feel better, or to help an organization that focuses on helping people feel better perform better. I didn't really expect to end up in an organization this large, with an opportunity to impact so many people. I see this as a tremendous opportunity to make an important difference. In this position you still have to approach the job one person at a time, even if, each day, you are trying to help millions of people. ●

Mark Wagar with the students of P.S. 57 in the Bronx, Empire's adopted school