

Dogwood Health Trust board lacks the diversity WNC deserves | OPINION



(Photo: Mark Barrett/mbarrett@citizentimes.com)



The formation of the Dogwood Health Trust (DHT) presents a once-in-many-generations opportunity for Western North Carolina.

This foundation, if approved by North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein, will be charged with administering the proceeds generated by [the sale of the non-profit Mission Health system](#) to the for-profit hospital operator HCA. The foundation stands to receive potentially as much as between one and two billion dollars, with a stated purpose to, “dramatically improve the health and well being of the people and communities of WNC.”

We - the coalition of undersigned community organizations- were encouraged to read in DHT’s bylaws that “the Board shall be comprised of directors who represent the diversity of the residents of Western North Carolina.” We agree that representation matters, especially when dealing with funds that will be allocated to those in our community who are most impacted by what are called the “social determinants of health.”

Educational inequity, low wages, food insecurity, and a lack of affordable housing, for example, are factors that disproportionately affect women, people of color, and people in poverty, and they create the health disparities that this foundation will be tasked with addressing.

So, imagine our dismay when it was announced in late August that [the first nine members of the Dogwood Health Trust board](#) of directors, with the exception of one member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and two white women, are white men. And not only that, but almost every member is steeped in prior relationships with Mission Health.

In a recent meeting with community leaders, Janice Brumit, DHT founding board chair, stated that the current board is uniquely qualified to carry out the serious fiduciary responsibilities required of the trust. This implies that people of color and women are not qualified for that task.

We know this is untrue.

Very qualified women and people of color have been nominated for this board of directors since the beginning of the process, with no response. Now we are being told that these nominees of color will not be considered, since there are to be no more board members selected from Buncombe County in the interest of “geographic diversity,” even though Buncombe County represents the highest concentration of people of color in Western North Carolina.

We strongly believe that communities know best what their own needs are, and to suggest that white men from Biltmore Forest are the only qualified people to make

decisions on behalf of women, people of color, and people in poverty is paternalistic at best, and an example of ongoing structural and institutional racism, classism, and sexism at its worst.

Asheville Buncombe County NAACP, and all our allies listed below, call on the Board of Dogwood Health Trust to form a body with at least 50 percent representation of women and 25 percent people of color based on historical disparities. The DHT bylaws state that the maximum number of board members is nineteen. We call on DHT to fill all nineteen seats, and we believe that some of the current board members must step aside – resign – to make space for a more equitable and inclusive representation of our communities, especially in Buncombe County.



As one of the largest per-capita foundations in the country, DHT can set the stage for truly transformative work by creating an equitable and inclusive board that brings together – and shares decision-making power among – representation from all of the voices of our region.

We encourage any concerned citizens to write to North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein's office at jharrod@ncdoj.gov and demand that the board of DHT reflect the communities it will serve. The money from the sale of Mission Hospital belongs to the people of Western North Carolina.

The Dogwood Health Trust must embody equity and inclusion if it seeks the trust of Western North Carolina.

Sincerely,

Carmen Ramos-Kennedy, President Asheville Buncombe County NAACP

With:

American Association of University Women- Asheville Branch

ACLU Western North Carolina Chapter

Asheville Buncombe Institute of Parity Achievement

BeLoved Asheville

Bountiful Cities

Carolina Jews for Justice/West

Christians for a United Community

Coming to the Table

Elders Fierce for Justice

Just Economics of WNC

Positive Changes Youth Ministries

YWCA of Asheville and WNC

WNC Citizens Ending Institutional Bigotry