

Dogwood Health Trust should be independent of Mission Health | OPINION

The people of WNC are at the threshold of a major decision being made on our behalf concerning the sale of Mission Health to the Hospital Corporation of America which is the largest for-profit health care corporation in the world. This letter is not to object to the sale (while acknowledging there are reasons for concern). Rather, it is to address the \$1.5 billion in proceeds which will generate over \$50 million yearly to be used towards the well-being of our mountain home. The transfer of the \$1.5 billion is to go to the formed Dogwood Health Trust which, as of now, is to be governed by seven men, two women, eight white people, and one Cherokee member with decisions already being made as to how to prioritize these funds.

Recently, health advocate Kathey Avery shared data that demonstrates how disproportionately health outcomes are for African Americans served by Mission Health. As a mother, the doubled rate of infant mortality of African American babies compared to white infants is especially disturbing. This statistic has persisted for over 100 years and is indicative of the lack of a racial and gender lens that has dogged all maternal and infant health care services, and frankly all of our institutions, for many years.

Here is additional historical context: In the early 1880's, a group of women in Asheville established the Little Flower Mission with the purpose of visiting the sick to bring flowers, food, and comfort. Their visits brought them face to face with the medical needs of people in Asheville - regardless of age, race, gender, or prosperity. In 1883 they established Mission Hospital in a five-bedroom house. According to the research of Nancy Marlowe, Mission Hospital grew under the wise counsel of this all women led board (albeit white) for the following 63 years.

It is an unfortunate truth, that since that time, Mission's board has been the space of largely white men -which signaled (as the largest non-profit in WNC) that it was (and is) an accepted representation of the residents. Even today, with 19 board members there are 12 white men, five white women, and two African American men on the Mission Health Board. Given the history of Mission and the opportunity to start anew, I call on the Dogwood Health Trust to be at least 50 percent female and 25 percent people of color along with representation of people from across the region.

The issue of board representation is one that I have advocated for over many years. As the recently retired director of the UNC Asheville Center for Diversity Education, I had conversations with other nonprofit leaders who shared that board members were required to do fundraising so it was hard to find women and people of color who had the skill sets or financial means to be successful. While I can dispute several different points of that argument, it is important to note the fundamental difference of the Dogwood Health Trust: it will not fund-raise. Mission Health, started by women caring for the sick over 130 years ago, has been built with our own money - through taxes (exempted), insurance benefits, and our cash matches. We, and those who came before us, put a substantial amount to Mission Health to generate that \$1.5 billion figure. We deserve to have representation that is worthy of the significant contributions women and people of color have made to Mission Health.

There are exemplary hospital conversion foundations with diverse initial boards that were established as independent of the current board from the hospital sale including ones in Missouri and Virginia. In particular, the Danville Health Trust contracted with MDC, Inc in Raleigh to vet an independent board that would hold the Hospital Corporation of America to the agreement. This is especially critical as this initial board will hire the staff which will set the tone of the trust for generations to come. With due respect to the current appointed board, all good people with excellent skills, I call on Attorney General Stein to require that the Dogwood Health

Trust be an independent board with no ties or conflicts of interest to the current Mission Health and soon to be Hospital Corporation of America.

The people of WNC deserve an independent board that represents the great diversity of WNC with the vision, experience, skills, and wisdom to match the challenges and opportunities before us.

Deborah Miles is the founding director of UNC Asheville's Center for Diversity Education and a member of the WNC Diversity Engagement Coalition. She lives in Asheville.