

Five Questions With: Talia Brookshire

By Elizabeth Graham - 09/18/2022



Talia Brookshire, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island's first-ever chief diversity officer, joined the organization in March.

Brookshire, who was offered the position after a national search, comes to the Ocean State from Indiana. She brings with her nearly two decades of experience as a diversity equity and inclusion leader in higher education, in the manufacturing industry and in elite-level sports, including USA Track & Field, USA Swimming and NASCAR.

In her new role, Brookshire will lead Neighborhood's DEI initiatives and oversee DEI-related growth in its culture and daily practices.

TALIA BROOKSHIRE is Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island's chief diversity officer. / COURTESY NEIGHBORHOOD HEALTH PLAN OF RHODE ISLAND

PBN: What made you decide to move from Indiana to join Neighborhood Health?

BROOKSHIRE: Simply put, Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island. That's it. I saw a company with a vision focused on, at its core, helping people live a better life. At the companies I previously worked, I certainly had the opportunity to develop programs to support people living a better life, but the work was not reflective of the company's primary mission.

When Neighborhood reached out, its mission to provide access to high-quality, cost-effective health care for Rhode Island's at-risk populations was clear. It resonated with me. I was excited about the possibilities of working with a team focused on issues that are personal to me: people, culture and health equity. And yes, I may

have been a tiny bit excited about the opportunity to serve as Neighborhood's first chief diversity officer!

The funny thing is that I never knew how absolutely gorgeous Rhode Island was until my family and I had accepted this new position and moved to the state. This move from Indiana has quickly turned out to be one of the best moves my family and I could have ever made.

PBN: What's at the top of your to-do list right now?

BROOKSHIRE: Everything! I want so badly to dig right in, develop programs, enhance current programs and institute processes. However, the reality is, that is not what is needed in this moment. One of the first things I realized after settling in is that Neighborhood already has a great culture of community engagement, celebration of culture and focus on health equity.

What I am most interested in doing at this time is learning the business of health care so that I can be the best resource possible to help lead this company as we look to provide for our members and providers.

Simultaneously, I am collecting data, asking hard questions and working to develop a plan that will streamline our efforts toward supporting people, celebrating culture and promoting health equity.

I am also celebrating a big win for Neighborhood! One of our corporate goals this year was to stand up three employee resource groups by the end of the year. We have established eight! It's so exciting to see people raise their hands to say this is something we feel passionate about and we want to support the culture that Neighborhood is cultivating.

That being said, while we will continue to outline and establish programs that aim to enhance the culture and the work we do, we are working very hard to highlight that at Neighborhood, the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion is not a program ... it is built into the fabric of who we are and what we do.

PBN: You have years of experience working with high-profile organizations that are aiming for better DEI practices. What are some things that you've learned that you are bringing to Neighborhood Health?

BROOKSHIRE: When I made the decision earlier in my career to leave NASCAR and the Olympic sports movement to work in higher education, one of my serious considerations was how and if the DEI methodologies and practices would translate across industries. It did and in big ways.

Most leaders would agree that it is beneficial when you bring in a fresh set of eyes to change culture. The ability for me to consider activations and practices that have not only worked at other companies but had major successes in other industries has definitely made this transition into health care less of a steep learning curve.

Things I have always found necessary to succeed include forming valuable partnerships (internally and externally), supporting individual growth for our members and employees, and providing opportunities to make sure our employees' voices are listened to. These are key for me.

PBN: Will there be opportunities for Neighborhood's members and providers to share their thoughts with you on DEI initiatives?

BROOKSHIRE: Fortunately, there are already several strong programs and practices in place at Neighborhood for seeking input and feedback from our members and providers. We will definitely tap into these to secure the information we need – and act upon it – for diversity and health equity initiatives.

For example, I learned shortly after starting at Neighborhood, that our customer experience methodologies are consistently gathering feedback from members and providers throughout their journey with the health plan, both broadly and on specific initiatives.

In fact, there is already a process in place whereby survey results are reviewed to assess whether different subgroups of our membership are having different experiences with Neighborhood – and if so, we figure out why and make changes to meet their needs. These findings guide what initiatives are prioritized and tracked for improvement by our Provider CX Workgroup and our Member CX Workgroup.

We also have two robust member advisory councils – one for our Medicaid members and one for our dually eligible (Medicare-Medicaid) members – that we look forward to leveraging. At each of the council's quarterly meetings, members are encouraged to give feedback on various topics so Neighborhood is aware of members' experiences and perspectives.

Often times we are asking for clarity on themes we are hearing about through the CX work, as well as hearing about personal experiences with the health care system. It is another way to know what's working well and where adjustments should be made.

As you can imagine, I am eager to leverage each of these initiatives to inform decision-making around diversity and health-equity initiatives. Like I said earlier, Neighborhood is weaving this work into the fabric of who we are and what we do.

PBN: What are some ways that you've found to identify needs within underserved communities?

BROOKSHIRE: Data. Data. Data. Plus, collaborating with community partners and earning the trust of our members by meeting them where they are.

For starters, Neighborhood is a trusted, "familiar face" in the community. Founded by Rhode Island's federally qualified Community Health Centers, we grew from the neighborhoods where our members live and where the fight for health equity happens. As such, we support a multitude of community organizations around the state each year. We are regularly involved in community and cultural festivals, health fairs, community health center visits, volunteering with charitable organizations and participating in fundraising events. As a result, we have become a trusted resource in the community.

Now let's get to the data piece. We are big champions of using data to inform decision-making. In addition to the survey data we secure through our customer experience work, we also have vast member claims data to pull from and act on. And that's where our amazing Health Equity Committee comes into play. The committee is deeply committed to using this data to identify health disparities among our membership and to then work closely with community partners to validate the findings and develop programs designed to improve the lives of our members.

For example, after identifying a "food desert" in Woonsocket where many of our Medicaid members live, we partnered with one of our Community Health Center founders, Thundermist [Health Center], on a food delivery program to address food insecurity.

We have also invested to address the maternal health disparities that exist for women of color through a partnership with the Business Innovation Factory to bring LunaYou, a first-of-its-kind maternal well-being program, to our pregnant members.

Currently, Neighborhood is working closely with the R.I. Department of Health and Rhode Island KIDS COUNT to develop and support programs that remove disparities in the areas of behavioral health, maternal health (with a special emphasis on doulas) and child obesity.

We are also collaborating with the Department of Health to harness and maximize the data from the KIDSNET immunization database – to help ensure all Rhode Island children are up to date on their vaccines – and working with the Rhode Island Child and Adult Immunization Registry to help integrate demographic information and fill in the blanks, as that data helps us help our members get the best health care possible.

In short, the data gives us a great running start, but the voices of our members and providers are what helps us develop successful plans.

Elizabeth Graham is a PBN contributing writer.