

# Following Up with Tomorrow's Leaders

## WINNERS REPORT AN ENHANCED SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND PURPOSE

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MARK CRAWFORD

**T**omorrow's Leaders is a Catholic Health Association program that recognizes promising young professionals who are poised to become the Catholic health ministry's future leaders. Each year, CHA honors a group of high-achieving individuals who are committed to advancing the mission of Catholic health care. Nomination criteria include dedication to mission, consistent high performance and compassionate ministry leadership. Below we interview nine previous recipients to see how recognition as a Tomorrow's Leader has influenced their professional and personal lives.

**Fahad Tahir**, *chief executive officer, St. Thomas Medical Partners, St. Thomas Health, Nashville, Tennessee*

When Fahad Tahir was named a Tomorrow's Leader in 2011, Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C., was evolving from a traditional hospital organization to a health system, and it was redefining its relationship with physicians and managing community health. The hospital had been losing physicians, and relations between administration and physicians were frayed. Tahir set to work to repair these relationships and streamline the transition. With his help, the system won three Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Innovation Awards totaling more than \$18 million — a testimony to Tahir's leadership abilities.

Being selected as a Tomorrow's Leader helped deepen Tahir's relationship with Catholic health care by "building relationships and understand-

ing the connection of our various ministries," he said. These successes led to Tahir's new role as CEO of Saint Thomas Medical Partners and to his participation in Ascension's Leadership Academy.

The award also helped him better define his role in Catholic health care, as well as his leadership approach. For example, he said, today he has a more heightened appreciation of ethical discernment in significant decisions, and he takes the time to "look at our decisions in the context of hundreds of years of history, rather than just momentary transactional actions and reactions."

"I look at the full picture of the patients we're privileged to serve, considering both clinical needs and psychosocial and emotional needs — a personalized approach that is unique to Catholic health care," Tahir said.

**Gabriela Saenz**, *vice president of advocacy and public policy, CHRISTUS Health, Irving, Texas*

As vice president of advocacy and public policy, attorney Gabriela Saenz's No. 1 priority is providing health care access to the most vulnerable



Tahir

citizens in the four states that CHRISTUS Health serves. At the time she was selected as a 2015 Tomorrow's Leader, she was spending considerable time centralizing advocacy services at the system office.

"There are always struggles when centralizing shared services, and this effort was no different,"



Saenz

said Saenz. "In the face of this challenge, it was especially rewarding to be recognized for my leadership at a time when personal reflections on my own performance brought self-doubt."

Since being recognized by CHA, Saenz was selected by *Modern Healthcare* as an "Up and Comer" and, in 2017, she was appointed a CHA board member.

"I owe much of my increased profile and involvement to my Tomorrow's Leaders award," she said.

Saenz continues to be highly active, participating in the Catholic Health Assembly, the CHA Legislative Advocacy Conference and the System Mission Leadership Forum in 2017.

"Over the years I have learned that, although the ministry will always have challenges, our history and the resilience that the sisters created and ingrained in us is our secret weapon," she said. "Our biggest responsibility is to protect that legacy, and I will be around for as long as the Catholic health care ministry will have me."

**Jamie Schaefer**, chief financial officer, Avera Sacred Heart Hospital, Avera Health, Yankton, South Dakota

With a master's degree in business administration, Jamie Schaefer enjoys finding innovative solutions to business challenges that make operations more efficient. She was designated as one of the ministry's Tomorrow's Leaders in 2015.



Schaefer

"It meant a lot to me," she said. "Having a financial position can sometimes make it hard to balance financial performance with

the mission of the facility. I was honored my co-workers felt that I was successful with that."

Having worked with Avera Health for almost 20

years, Schaefer has seen how decisions are made by focusing not only on financial impact, but also on the mission of the health system and the impact on employees and the community. "This approach was ingrained in me that when I moved into this financial leadership position, it was easy to continue with those same priorities," she added.

Although many rural hospitals struggle financially, the 144-bed Avera Sacred Heart Hospital and its critical access hospital continue to show strong financial performance under Schaefer's guidance. In today's changing health care environment, it is imperative for a hospital to be as operationally efficient as possible to remain competitive. Currently, Schaefer oversees a financial services centralization project.

"Although leading this transition has its challenges, I think often on the history of the sisters who started the health care mission," she said. "This helps me remember that the finance department is here to support this mission and those whom we serve."

**Kathleen DeLoach Benton**, director of clinical ethics and palliative care, Candler Hospital Campus, Savannah, Georgia

As director of clinical ethics and palliative care for Candler Health System, Kathleen DeLoach Benton spends much of her time helping patients,



Benton

families and clinicians navigate difficult health care decisions. She also continues to expand the system's ethics consultation services and education offerings for internal and external groups.

Benton received her Tomorrow's Leader Award in 2012, and she credits that moment with stimulating her interest and involvement in CHA. For example, she joined the editorial advisory committee for CHA's *Health Progress* magazine, and she "relishes every ounce of knowledge [CHA] bestows at the conferences," she said. "This networking has led to working relationships with CHA fellows, staff, and members. My work with CHA as an organizational member has given me growth beyond my expectations."

Benton dates her efforts as a patient advocate from the time she was 5 years old, and she and her family helped her brother Daniel con-

tend with Proteus Syndrome (“Elephant Man” disease). Daniel recently passed away, and in his honor, Benton wrote *Daniel’s World*, a children’s book that focuses on acceptance of children with disabilities.

“Living in grief also broadens your heart to other areas,” Benton noted. “I am eager to do more to impact the social determinants of health and offer our services beyond the walls of our facility.”

Benton has written several articles and another book entitled *The Skill of End-of-Life Communication for Clinicians*. She serves on the boards of The Steward Center for Palliative Care, Hospice Savannah and the Proteus Syndrome Foundation.

**Mark Repenshek**, *director of ethics integration, Ascension Wisconsin, Glendale, Wisconsin*

Mark Repenshek oversees ethics integration at Ascension Wisconsin. His responsibilities include developing ethical decision-making models for senior leadership and implementing innovations in the system’s advanced care planning program. He often consults with patients and physicians as they work together to make important health care decisions.



**Repenshek**

Repenshek has published more than a dozen articles on ethics, made presentations at numerous national conferences, consulted with national organizations — including CHA — and he has been a contributing author for two books on health care ethics.

Receiving the Tomorrow’s Leader Award in 2011 “was an incredible honor,” he said. “To be recognized by the Catholic Health Association and nominated by my organization made explicit a leadership competency that I felt was merely implicit in my role. I was most proud to be recognized by the clinical leadership for making significant quality improvements in clinical ethics consultation for patients, families and caregivers.”

Repenshek has been very involved with CHA in 2017, attending the Catholic Health Assembly, CHA’s Theology and Ethics Colloquium and the Catholic Social Teaching and Climate Change webinar. He said that being honored by CHA has created many opportunities for him in organizational and clinical ethics consultation, including outside his current health system role.

“Given that ethics, as a discipline, is often one

of the few roles that traverses the clinical and administrative aspects of health care delivery, the award affirmed leadership competencies that may not be associated with titles or reporting relationships,” he said. “It also helped reinforce the conviction that bringing my faith life to my professional role was precisely what I was being called to offer the ministry.”

**Michael Miller, Jr.**, *regional chief mission officer, Saint Joseph Mercy Health System, Trinity Health, Canton, Michigan*

Michael Miller, Jr., was designated a Tomorrow’s Leader in 2017, thanks to his efforts in creating a



**Miller**

dental clinic for Medicaid and low-income uninsured patients in two counties, growing the health system’s clinical pastoral education program, community benefit work such as the Prescription for Health program and serving on multiple community boards, as well as on the CHA Mission Leader Advisory committee.

“Receiving the award was both an honor and a gift,” he said. “Not only did it mean recognition among my peers, it was a gift in that I was able to be a part of this group and meet some new individuals and other leaders in the ministry.”

Miller said the award helped him gain a better sense of the national ministry — getting beyond his regional role to consider a broader national view of the opportunities and challenges across the ministry. It also made him realize that many good organizations with highly talented leaders contribute to ministries.

“Now I have a greater network of colleagues to tap into to share best practices and seek opinions on issues that I face,” he said.

A good example is the topic of immigration.

“Fr. Bryan Hehir’s presentation on the long history of the Catholic church’s role in serving immigrants through its schools, social service agencies and hospitals enabled me to make some connections with issues we face today as we care for some of our most vulnerable citizens,” he said.

**Sondra Norder**, *president and CEO, St. Paul Elder Services, Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity Sponsored Ministries, Kaukauna, Wisconsin*

Sondra Norder was honored as a Tomorrow's Leader in 2015 in recognition of how she turned



Norder

financials around from significant operating losses to positive profit margins. She also developed quality assurance and improvement programs that led to improved quality outcomes, including the system's five-star ratings for its skilled nursing facilities. Norder helped develop a three-phase master plan that resulted in a campus-wide renovation, an expansion of the post-acute care unit and construction of a new memory-care assisted living facility.

Since winning the award, numerous fellow Catholic health care leaders have reached out to Norder simply to connect or to request input on matters pertaining to post-acute care, long-term care and senior living.

"Such recognition and validation is incredibly motivating for me, so I strive to maintain the high level of performance and excellence expected of a Tomorrow's Leader," she said.

As far as the future goes, being a Tomorrow's Leader has only increased the confidence of her system's board and sponsor in Norder's abilities and ideas, allowing her to explore new opportunities and projects with a sense of visionary leadership.

"We are currently working on an exciting growth opportunity that would require great discipline and energy to make successful, which is made much more feasible with this increased support," she said.

**Stephanie G. Manson**, vice president of operations, Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

At the time she was honored with a 2011 Tomorrow's



Manson

Leader award, Stephanie Manson had been working with Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center for almost 10 years. Accomplishments that led to her nomination included strong growth in pediatric services and the effective branding campaign for a new children's hospital. She also was in charge of the organization's journey to

excellence using Baldrige criteria, which resulted in being awarded their Louisiana Quality Foundation's Louisiana Performance Excellence Award.

She noted that receiving the Tomorrow's Leader award has deepened her commitment and sense of responsibility to serving the ministry.

"Recognizing our work as an extension of the church aligns with my personal values," said Manson. "I have two daughters who are watching me in my career and as a leader. When each of them talks about their goals and dreams, I know personally the potential for lasting impact that has less to do with my job and everything to do with my faith expressed through work. That's really powerful."

As part of the Tomorrow's Leader experience, she also was fortunate to spend the day in dialogue with the other recipients, religious leaders and many senior leaders of the largest and most successful Catholic health systems in the country.

"Getting to know them helped me realize the powerful ministry connection we have in service to those most in need," said Manson. "I truly feel the power of the difference we are making when working as a large combined ministry of the church. That inspires me daily."

**Tracy Neary**, regional vice president for mission integration, St. Vincent Healthcare, SCL Health, Billings, Montana

After becoming disillusioned with constant exposure to crime and conflict as a television



Neary

news reporter, Tracy Neary sought a career that would give her hands-on involvement in community benefit work. She found that opportunity at St. Vincent Healthcare. Her dedicated work on community collaborations focused on policy, system and environmental change strategies was responsible for her Tomorrow's Leaders Award nomination, with which she was honored in 2012.

"I vividly remember sitting at my desk, opening the congratulations letter from Sr. Carol [Keehan, DC], and rereading it several times because I was completely stunned," said Neary. "I had been fortunate to attend the Assembly in past years and applaud the leaders, awed by their accomplishments. I could not imagine a more meaningful honor."

This recognition inspired Neary to deepen her

commitment to learning and engagement with CHA — for example, she is now part of the *Health Progress* editorial advisory committee and chairs CHA's community benefit committee.

Neary left her position as hospital director of community benefit at St. Vincent Healthcare to become regional vice president for mission integration of its parent system, SCL Health–Montana region.

“I felt called, but not exactly equipped, to serve at the executive level,” she said. “However, I have confidence that the relationships I had developed through CHA, combined with the rich educational resources at my fingertips, will enhance my service in this new scope of work.”

On a personal level, Neary said she feels a deeper sense of responsibility to the ministry and the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth. Over the last year she has become an associate of the religious community — “something I would never have imagined before, working so closely with these courageous and inspiring women walking with the Vincentian charism in their service to God.”

#### **A GREATER SENSE OF COMMUNITY**

According to members of the group, perhaps the greatest impact of being recognized by CHA as a Tomorrow's Leader has been the greater sense of community and purpose they felt afterward — and an even stronger desire to give back to others.

“As I continue in my daily work, I draw on the

deeper sense of being part of a national ministry, in order to impact my local community,” said Miller.

For Neary, the honor inspired her to mentor others.

“I nominated Kassie Runsabove for the same honor and was delighted to see her win it two years ago,” said Neary. “Watching her receive the award for her work with American Indian communities in Montana was even better than receiving the award myself!”

All these leaders were quick to point out that their successes have been a team effort.

“I have a deep sense of appreciation for the leadership team around me that has contributed to the achievements we have had as an organization, which led to this nomination and recognition,” said Norder. “Much of my success throughout my career has been because I put good people around me; I absolutely continue to share this honor with all of them.”

Manson agreed. “Winning the award was a tremendous honor, but the greater impact is the sense of responsibility I feel to lead the ministry into the future,” she said. “One of our beloved sisters reminded us that we stand on the shoulders of giants. We owe it to the greats that came before us to perpetuate the ministry in service to others.”

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