

Lifespan, CNE withdraw merger application

Align not to enter into litigation with FTC ruling to block the merger

PROVIDENCE – The Board of Directors for both Lifespan and Care New England met separately last week and have decided not to pursue litigation on the matter, and will withdraw their Hospital Conversions Act application from the Rhode Island Dept. of Health (RIDOH).

This decision follows the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) announcement on February 17, 2022, that it intended to file suit to block the Lifespan and Care New England merger, citing competition concerns. Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha joined the FTC in challenging the merger on that same day.

Both boards also voted not to pursue a legislative solution, such as a Certificate of Public Advantage (COPA). Additionally, the parties have terminated the Definitive Agreement which included an exclusivity clause.

A statement from the organizations said both continue to believe the combination of the systems would have greatly enhanced the clinical, academic and research missions, reduced costs and improved the patient care environment.

It further stated that both organizations are committed to partner in ways that are appropriate from a legal perspective, and allow them to best serve the needs of the community and that leadership is focused on figuring out, with its academic partner, Brown University, the best path forward for the community in terms of cost, quality and access to healthcare in an extremely challenging environment. ❖

RI first in US for percentage of population fully vaccinated

PROVIDENCE – Rhode Island is now ranked as the leading state in the nation for percentage of its population that is fully vaccinated against COVID-19 at 80%. Rhode Island also currently ranks 3rd in the nation for COVID-19 boosters at over 37%.

“Severe illness from COVID-19 is now largely preventable because of the primary series vaccines and booster doses that we have available,” said Interim Director of Health **JAMES McDONALD, MD, MPH**. “The success of Rhode Island’s vaccination campaign is a main reason why our hospitalization rate per case in January did not reach the levels that we saw at prior points in the pandemic. However, COVID-19 is still with us. It is critical that we all remain up to date with our COVID-19 vaccinations.”

Since COVID-19 cases peaked most recently in early January, Rhode Island has seen a 94% decrease in case rates. Hospitalizations have decreased by 52% since their peak in mid-January. Rhode Island is tied for 3rd in the nation for vaccinations among children ages 5 to 11. ❖

CDC releases new reports on health, well-being of children during COVID-19

WASHINGTON, DC – On Feb. 18th, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released two new reports in *MMWR* that provide important insights on the health and well-being of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first report looked at pediatric emergency department visits. The study found that overall pediatric emergency department visits decreased in 2020, 2021, and in January 2022 compared with visits in 2019, while COVID-19-related emergency department visits increased across all pandemic years and among pediatric age groups.

There were also increases in the weekly number and proportion of emergency department visits for certain types of injuries, some chronic diseases, and visits related to behavioral health concerns, especially among older children (5–11 years) and adolescents (12–17 years). Factors affecting caregivers during the pandemic, including unavailable or unpredictable

childcare, illness, financial hardship, and mental health concerns, might increase a child’s vulnerabilities. Loss of a parent or caregiver, increases in other challenges, and disruptions in daily routine due to the COVID-19 pandemic might have also increased a child’s behavioral health concerns and unhealthy coping behaviors.

Mental health conditions

The second report examined changes in pediatric emergency department visits for mental health conditions and found that adolescent girls (12–17 years) accounted for the largest increases in the number and proportion of emergency department visits for mental health conditions in 2020, 2021, and in January 2022 compared with 2019. Weekly visits for eating and tic disorders increased for females, and particularly adolescent females (12–17 years), during 2020, 2021, and in January 2022.

The highly complex nature of indi-

vidual experiences makes it difficult to identify a single reason for changes in mental health conditions during the pandemic. While extended time at home could increase familial support for some youth, it may have increased challenges and stressors among others. These factors, as well as other pandemic-related stressors that impact families (e.g., increases in parental mental health problems, parental substance use, financial strain, and loss of a parent or caregiver), could have created or increased the risk for mental health conditions.

Early identification and expanded evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies are critical to improving children’s mental health, especially among adolescent females who might have increased need. CDC recommends increased awareness for health concerns among children and adolescents that could arise due to delayed medical care and heightened emotional distress. ❖

Innovative treatment for GERD marks first for RI

Dr. Jordan Hebert is first surgeon in RI to perform LINX® procedure as a surgical treatment for chronic heartburn caused by GERD

WAKEFIELD – On Jan. 31st, **DR. JORDAN F. HEBERT** of South County Medical Group successfully completed the first LINX® procedure in Rhode Island on a patient who suffered from gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

This innovative procedure uses a magnetic implant to assist the weakened valve that separates the esophagus from the stomach.

“Being the first surgeon in Rhode Island to perform this treatment was made possible by South County Health bringing the latest generation of diagnostic and therapeutic technology all under one roof,” Dr. Hebert said. “This procedure is a real game changer for patients suffering from GERD.”

To perform the procedure, Dr. Hebert used da Vinci XI robotic-assisted surgical technology, an advanced, minimally invasive technique designed to help the patient heal quickly with minimal discomfort.

Because the procedure does not require changes to the stomach anatomy,



Dr. Jordan Hebert holds the LINX device used to surgically treat GERD.

patients can resume their normal diet immediately after surgery.

Other surgical options for severe GERD include a procedure called fundoplication, which alters the anatomy of the stomach. While this option is suitable for some patients, there are side effects associated with fundoplication that many patients find chronically bothersome.

“I always strive to offer my patients the best surgical care options available, and that is why I decided to introduce this procedure to Rhode Island,” Dr. Hebert said. “Many of the side effects that patients report with a traditional fundoplication are avoided with LINX.”

The safety and effectiveness of the LINX® implant are well documented in the medical community.

“While this is the first time LINX has been used in Rhode Island, this is actually a time-tested treatment with a long track record of excellent results throughout the United States. LINX has been FDA approved for a decade now,” he said. ❖



Dr. Jordan Hebert (seated left) manipulates the robotic arms of the da Vinci XI from a console in the operating room to implant the LINX device.

[PHOTOS COURTESY SOUTH COUNTY HEALTH]

\$10M gift from Reed Hastings, Patty Quillin to bolster 58-year-old Brown-Tougaloo Partnership

TOUGALOO, MISS., PROVIDENCE [TOUGALOO COLLEGE AND BROWN UNIVERSITY] – A \$10 million gift from Netflix CEO **REED HASTINGS** and documentary film producer **PATTY QUILLIN** will provide a major boost in scholarship support for students at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college in Tougaloo, Mississippi.

The gift will fund much-needed financial aid for Tougaloo students working toward careers in medicine, public health, the sciences, education, business and other fields and aspiring to make a positive impact on their communities after graduation. It will also support Tougaloo students participating in a unique and enduring 58-year-old partnership between Brown and Tougaloo, which has connected generations of students, faculty and staff from both institutions through academic exchanges, fellowships, research projects and other initiatives.

Hastings and Quillin, a California-based couple who are longtime champions of equity in education, have supported Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with multiple gifts over time, driven by the outsize role that HBCUs play in educating Black leaders who make a positive impact in a wide range of professions.

“HBCUs have been vastly undervalued for a long time,” Hastings and Quillin said. “They have an incredible track record of graduating so many Black leaders across the U.S. – doctors, lawyers, engineers and more. By investing in the extraordinary students who attend Tougaloo and Brown, we’re investing in America’s future.”

Of the total gift, \$5 million will go to Tougaloo College to bolster the school’s endowment and provide annual scholarship funding that directly supports high-achieving students with high financial need. Hastings joined Tougaloo President Carmen J. Walters and other college leaders in a visit to the Mississippi campus on Monday, Feb. 21, that included the opportunity to meet with students and faculty members.

Walters said the funds will provide crucial need-based scholarships to deserving and talented undergraduates, including many who continue to contend with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The remarkable personal gift to the historic Brown-Tougaloo Partnership from philanthropists Reed Hastings and Patricia Quillin will transform the lives of Tougaloo College students,” Walters said. “This donation, setting a new precedent as the largest gift to the Brown-Tougaloo Partnership, is a living testimony to their strong belief in the *value* of giving, the *value* of education and the *value* of HBCUs. This transformative gift is a life-changing opportunity for our students, and the impact will be far-reaching.”

Scholarship fund at Brown

The remaining \$5 million will establish the Brown-Tougaloo Partnership Scholarship Fund as part of Brown University’s endowment. The fund will provide annual support for Tougaloo students who come to Brown as part of the partnership, whether to pursue a graduate or medical degree or an academic exchange program.

“Brown and Tougaloo share a deeply held commitment to preparing graduates to make a positive impact in their communities,” said Brown President **CHRISTINA H. PAXSON**. “Our shared ideals serve as an unbreakable foundation for a 58-year-old partnership that has yielded important insights for students and scholars, infused both campuses with new perspectives and provided life-changing experiences for Tougaloo and Brown students. This generous gift from Reed Hastings and Patty Quillin ensures that this truly one-of-a-kind partnership will continue to expand for many decades to come.”

Building on an enduring partnership

The gift from Hastings and Quillin is the largest philanthropic commitment to the longstanding Brown-Tougaloo Partnership, which began in 1964 during the Civil Rights Movement.



Patty Quillin and Reed Hastings

[PHOTO: DREW ALITZER PHOTOGRAPHY]

That year, as Tougaloo College became a known refuge for activists and a central meeting point for movement organizers, the Mississippi State Legislature introduced bills to revoke Tougaloo’s charter and prevent its graduates from becoming teachers in the state. A group of concerned Providence citizens with ties to Mississippi approached then-Brown President Barnaby Keeney and asked for help to support Tougaloo. Months later, the two institutions had drawn up an agreement that began with a student exchange program funded by the Rockefeller and Ford foundations.

Fifty-eight years later, the agreement has grown into a strong, multifaceted partnership offering opportunities for student and faculty academic exchanges and collaborative research ventures. Since its inception, more than 760 Tougaloo and Brown students and faculty have participated in the program. Undergraduate participants spend time learning on the respective campuses, faculty build

research collaborations, and Tougaloo graduates pursuing medical careers come to Brown's Warren Alpert Medical School through an early-identification program. Most recently, Brown's School of Public Health created a Health Equity Scholars program, which each year admits an exceptional cohort of master of public health students from Tougaloo and other HBCUs.

The new Brown-Tougaloo Partnership Scholarship Fund enabled by the gift will ensure that participating Tougaloo students have access to myriad academic and fellowship opportunities at Brown. With an estimated initial annual payout between \$200,000 and \$250,000 (a number expected to grow over time) the fund will have the capacity to support a range of Tougaloo students with costs ranging from tuition for pursuing graduate or medical studies at Brown to undergraduate semester exchange programs.

Carey Williams, a senior biology major from Lexington, a small, rural town in the Mississippi Delta, is one student who will pursue an MD at Brown after

graduating from Tougaloo. As a sophomore, Williams was admitted to an early-identification program (EIP) at Brown's Warren Alpert Medical School.

"For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a medical doctor, and I want to serve my community by providing health care in underserved communities," Williams said. "The program afforded me opportunities to study at Brown for a semester, meet and experience people of different cultures, and gain an invaluable structured introduction to the elements of rigor and expectations toward the world of medical school. This program opened doors for me that I did not know existed."

Williams will graduate from Tougaloo College in May 2022 before heading to Providence for medical school.

"The scholarship made possible by Reed Hastings and Patricia Quillin will give me the financial freedom to accomplish my educational goals at Brown," Williams said. "The EIP program has allowed me to become more confident than ever in my pursuit of a career in

medicine. The Brown-Tougaloo Partnership has changed my life for the better."

"HBCUs empower Black students to achieve their dreams, and that is a great thing to bring attention to," Hastings said. "Investing in the long-term health of these colleges and universities will help ensure a diverse and inclusive future for workplaces around the country."

He added that Brown's commitment to engaging with Tougaloo in the early 1960s – a time when many predominantly white institutions across the country, educational and otherwise, were reluctant to embrace the tenets of racial equality – inspired him to support the two institutions' unique partnership.

"The partnership between Tougaloo and Brown fascinates me, because it is truly exceptional," Hastings said. "This relationship has enriched so many lives over the last six decades. We wanted to make sure this special bond continues to prosper and thrive so that future generations of Tougaloo and Brown students can keep sharing new perspectives and generating new ideas." ❖

Brown researchers awarded Foundation for Opioid Response grant

NEW YORK, NY – The Foundation for Opioid Response Efforts (FORE), a private 501(c)(3) national grant-making foundation focused on ending the nation's opioid crisis, announced 11 new grants totaling \$4.8 million to support innovative solutions to some of the opioid crisis' most challenging problems.

"We are launching our Innovation Program to generate and support new approaches to some of the long-standing barriers to making real progress in addressing the opioid crisis – how to better tackle stigma, generate more timely and actionable data, and help for people transitioning from treatment to long-term recovery," says FORE President Dr. Karen A. Scott. "These projects have great potential to give us exciting new tools and lessons that will help communities around the country respond to the crisis more effectively, inform future policy decisions, and ultimately save lives."

"FORE prioritizes projects that reach high-risk populations with patient-centered solutions and a commitment to health



Alexandra Collins, PhD



Rachel Wightman, MD

equity," said Dr. Andrea Barthwell, Chair of FORE's Board of Directors. "Our new Innovation Program continues to show our commitment to funding diverse projects that contribute solutions to the crisis at national, state, and community levels."

FORE's Innovation Program is funding projects that combine approaches from diverse fields and engage multi-disciplinary teams

to encourage work on some of the crisis' most intractable challenges:

Among the new grantees in the **Timely and Actionable Data** category is Brown University:

Understanding Drug Use Within a Rapidly Changing Supply: An Ethnographic and Toxicologic Investigation to Improve Overdose Prevention and Supply Surveillance Communication.

Principal Investigators: **ALEXANDRA COLLINS, PhD**, and **RACHEL WIGHTMAN, MD**, \$564,319.

RI graded 'B' for gun safety laws

Giffords Law Center's Annual Gun Law Scorecard grades and ranks all 50 states on their gun laws; in 2021, 24 states received an F.

WASHINGTON, DC – In 2021, a number of state legislatures took the threat of gun violence seriously and passed 75 new laws in 27 states and Washington DC. In the latest edition of the **Annual Gun Law Scorecard, Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence** graded and ranked each state on the strength of its gun laws, showing that states with stronger gun laws have lower gun death rates and save more lives.

Rhode Island received a B for its gun safety laws. In 2020, the last year for which data is available, 54 people died from firearm injuries in Rhode Island, representing a 12% increase in the gun death rate in the state over the previous year. This increase was primarily driven by increases in gun homicides. The number of gun homicides rose from 12 in 2019 to 22 in 2020. Gun suicides fell slightly in the state. From 2019 to 2020, the gun suicide rate decreased by 7%.

In 2021, Rhode Island prohibited concealed carry permit holders from carrying guns on K-12 school grounds and passed legislation to curb gun trafficking. In order to improve its grade, Rhode Island should enact a firearm relinquishment law, invest in community violence intervention programs, strengthen protections for victims of domestic violence and hate crimes, and prohibit assault weapons and large-capacity magazines.

- **Website:** Learn more about Rhode Island's ranking by visiting this year's Scorecard.
- **Fact Sheet:** The State of Gun Violence in Rhode Island.

States with the strongest gun laws have continued taking significant steps to protect their residents from gun violence, including:

- **California (A):** Enacted a law to improve efforts to identify gun dealers who engage in gun trafficking, committed \$76 million for local community violence intervention and prevention programming, and made it easier for people who survive domestic abuse to obtain firearm-prohibiting protective orders.
- **New Jersey (A):** Committed \$10 million in funding for local community violence intervention and prevention programming.
- **New York (A-):** Passed a first-of-its-kind law that allows people to sue gun dealers and manufacturers when they fail to act responsibly and created a state firearm violence research institute.

- **Maryland (A-):** Enacted a law requiring background checks on long gun purchases and committed significant funding for local community violence intervention and prevention programming.

States with the lowest grades are most responsible for the troubling export of guns used for crimes in other states. These states also put their residents at risk by pushing dangerous policies like "Stand Your Ground," which allows people to shoot first and ask questions later, and permitless carry, which allows untrained, unvetted people to carry hidden, loaded guns in public. Some of the worst legislation passed in the last year includes:

- **Iowa (F):** Repealed its law requiring background checks on private sales of firearms and allowed people to carry concealed guns in public without safety training or a background check.
- **Missouri (F):** Made law enforcement officers and agencies, public officials, and private individuals personally liable in civil court and subject to a \$50,000 fine for enforcing federal gun laws.
- **Montana (F):** Passed a law allowing guns on the campuses of colleges and universities that was later declared unconstitutional.

Visit the Annual Gun Law Scorecard at gunlawscorecard.org

"2021 was yet another year of crisis for our country. Too many communities had to reckon with the trauma and pain of surging gun violence, armed hate, and racial discrimination – all in the midst of the ongoing pandemic," said Robyn Thomas, executive director of Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. "What our Scorecard shows, year after year is that it is possible to take action to end this senseless violence. States with strong gun safety laws have fewer gun deaths – but illegal trafficking leaves residents of these states vulnerable. This progress must extend to every single state across the nation. We hope the Gun Law Scorecard will continue to serve as a resource for our elected officials who understand that getting a passing grade can be a matter of life and death." ❖