

Defining Success and Leading by Example: The Story of Con Alma Health Foundation

By Melissa Johnson, Field Director, NCRP

With the motto “it grows as it goes,” New Mexico is a southwestern state known to attract and enchant many. Though it is the 5th largest state in the U.S., with a population of nearly 2 million, the diversity of people, landscape and culture shapes an environment where the idea and reality of community becomes vital to the well-being of its residents. It is here where you will find Con Alma Health Foundation aiming to improve the health of all New Mexicans.

Con Alma Health Foundation, Inc. is New Mexico’s largest health foundation. It was created in 2001 through the sale of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico, a not-for-profit corporation. State law required that its non-charitable assets be set aside for a similar organization. The conversion provided charitable assets of more than \$20 million for the Con Alma Health Foundation.

Defining the Meaning of Success

The development of Con Alma Health Foundation was seized as an opportunity to create a model that honors, respects and strengthens the health of New Mexicans. The term *con alma* means “with soul.” Surrounded by the rich diversity of Native American communities, a vibrant Latino population and a myriad of cultural and spiritual definitions of health, the Con Alma Health Foundation’s founding governing body vowed to “respect and respond to the values and experiences of all peoples and communities in New Mexico.”

The foundation defines health broadly and includes components of environmental, psychological, emotional, behavioral, oral health, social, economic and spiritual well-being. By defining health holistically, the foundation’s mission and vision were developed from an earnest desire to make systemic and long term change that benefit all New Mexicans.

The mission of the foundation reads:

Con Alma Health Foundation is organized to be aware of and respond to the health rights and needs of culturally and demographically diverse peoples and communities of New Mexico. Con Alma will seek to improve the health status and access to health care services for all New Mexicans and will advocate for a health policy which will address the health needs of all New Mexicans. The foundation will make grants, contributions, and program related investments to fulfill its Mission.

It stresses the need to provide services and the importance of access to these services. Underlying this mission is the recognition that equity and equality are issues that need to be addressed, and advocacy on health policy is a strategy they have to utilize to be effective. The foundation’s operations and practices are positioned to have the best chance at succeeding. Guided by its mission, the foundation pursues the following goals through its grantmaking:

- To address the particular health needs of traditionally underserved populations, including low-income individual, people of color, youth and residents of rural areas;
- To support and strengthen nonprofit organizations that seek to improve the health of underserved populations;
- To recognize and encourage leaders who are working to increase health and wellness within their communities; and,
- To inform the development of public policies that promote wellness and enhances access to preventive health care.



Con Alma Health Foundation’s nursing pipeline program called Project DIVERSITY has helped bring statewide focus to the nursing shortage in New Mexico. Con Alma is committed to partnerships that improve health. Now more than ever, all three sectors, the nonprofit, government/public and business sector, must be involved in creating a working consensus and implementing solutions.

Leading With Values

Foundations have become well equipped to build mission statements and goals that aim to achieve the greatest impacts, and building a plan of operations that supports the work has become a reasonable task. What often is more challenging is creating a lens or culture of practice. Con Alma Health Foundation proves that developing and leading with values ensure that mission, goals and practices add up to be more than the sum of all the parts.

From an inclusive approach to decision-making to the diverse governing statewide board, the foundation seeks to take into account the geographic, ethnic, gender, age, socioeconomic and other factors that represent the diversity of the peoples and communities of New Mexico. Their Community Advisory Committee provides advice and recommendations to the Board concerning the performance of the foundation in achieving its charitable purpose and mission. The foundation has six core values that guide its policies, operations and grantmaking:

1. **Improve the health status of all New Mexicans.** The foundation is committed to reducing health disparities by promoting greater access to health care and improved quality of health care for all New Mexicans – with a special emphasis on people of color and rural and tribal communities – to protect the rights of all its residents to adequate health care.
2. **Maintain the public trust.** The foundation adheres

to the highest standards of accountability by providing accurate financial and programmatic reporting and public disclosure, by adherence to a strong conflict of interest policy and code of conduct, by evaluating and reporting outcomes of grant making activities, and by engaging communities in meaningful dialogue and problem-solving.

3. **Involve, collaborate and partner with New Mexico communities.** The foundation involves local and indigenous communities in decision-making by appointing and electing members of these communities to policy making and advisory positions; engaging all communities in health care needs assessments and evaluation processes; and fostering relationships with federal, tribal, state, county, city and town governments, colonias and grass-roots communities; with academic and health care institutions; with public charities with a health or public policy mission; and with a broad spectrum of leaders from across New Mexico.
4. **Innovate and lead.** The foundation defines health broadly, searches for new solutions to old problems and risks failure in order to succeed. It supports the identification, preservation and communication of traditional practices that maintain, foster and improve the health of its communities.
5. **Teach and learn.** For example, the foundation supports the development of health care professionals who reflect the

cultural and linguistic diversity of New Mexico, resulting in greater opportunities for those underrepresented in the health care fields.

6. **Be an effective advocate for health policy, which supports the foundation's charitable purpose and mission.** The foundation seeks to shape health policy and implementation consistent with its mission and core values. It encourages consumer participation in health policy formation and individual health decisions so that consumers are able to develop their skills and capacities to become advocates within their own communities and to better understand the reality they seek to transform. The foundation also supports programs that provide analysis of health data and policy issues, and advocacy on those policies that foster its mission.

Embracing the Role of Advocacy in Society

Most people understand and value the service role of the nonprofit sector. Less understood is the critical advocacy role of nonprofits and foundations – a role that is both a right and a responsibility.

Con Alma Foundation understands the importance of advocacy. “Con Alma Health Foundation is committed to fulfilling its mission, which includes supporting advocacy, organizing and civic engagement,” said Dolores Roybal, the foundation’s executive director. “It also involves partnering with other stakeholders to improve the

health status and access to health care services for the people and communities we serve.”

The foundation exercises its capacity and legal ability to engage in and support advocacy in many ways. Below are just a few examples of such efforts:

- Supported education and outreach efforts to diverse communities and constituencies around the state to establish a system of guaranteed comprehensive and affordable health coverage for all New Mexicans through the Health Security for New Mexicans Campaign and Health Action New Mexico.
- Funded legislative advocacy training for Pueblo People with Disabilities in the Native American Independent Living community.
- Strengthens the capacity of nonprofits in the health sector by funding the creation of advocacy organizations like Health Action New Mexico and seeded funding for the statewide Health Care of All campaign.

Like many other foundations, it has supported important research that have been critical to building awareness and encouraging responsiveness among residents, nonprofits, for profit entities, and government officials regarding the health status of New Mexicans. The foundation released *The Health Disparity Gap in New Mexico: A Roadmap for Grantmaking* in May 2006. In 2008, the foundation released an issue brief, *Women’s Health Inequalities in New Mexico: Challenges & Policy Options*,

that illustrates the determinants of women’s health in New Mexico and suggests broad areas of policy options to assure that all women are able to achieve equitable access to health care and a healthy life, regardless of race/ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status.

The foundation also looks beyond what it can do alone and works in collaboration with other funders in New Mexico and nationwide. It has funded and is a lead participant in the New Mexico Health Equity Working Group, which seeks to reframe health policy within a social equity framework by:

1. Engaging communities and policy-makers in critical dialogue/thinking about the root causes of health disparities;
2. Connecting/motivating individuals, communities and organizations to work together; and
3. Acting to improve health in New Mexico through the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies that create and sustain equitable conditions to support healthy communities.

One Model for the Philanthropy Community

Roy Disney, an American film writer, producer, and nephew of Walt Disney once said, “It’s not hard to make decisions when you know what your values are.” This statement rings true for Con Alma Health Foundation. Although there are many foundations in New Mexico and across the country that

work each day to boldly chart out new and improved ways to support their mission, invest in communities and strengthen the nonprofit sector, the story of Con Alma Health Foundation is an inspiration to other philanthropic organizations on many levels. It is a story that demonstrates how important it is for a foundation to envision what success might look like in the long term, and determine the kind of operation and practices that will best help them meet their goals. It is among the few foundations that lead with values. And it is a foundation built to strengthen democracy by its full embrace of the role of advocacy in society.

[Con Alma Health Foundation](#) was among the 108 foundations in [Criteria for Philanthropy at Its Best](#) that allocated more than 50 percent of their grantmaking to serve marginalized communities. It also was among the 132 foundations that provided at least 50 percent of their grants as multiyear funding.

The foundation has been supporting advocacy, organizing and civic engagement efforts of nonprofits in New Mexico, and it is looking to further increase their grantmaking for these types of activities. Learn how Con Alma Health Foundation helped New Mexico through its support of policy engagement efforts in [Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in New Mexico](#).

