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Health Care

## AdventHealth exec: Why diversity, equity and inclusion has to be 'owned' by business leaders



Jessica Brazier, vice president and chief diversity and inclusion officer, AdventHealth

JIM CARCHIDI/OBJ



By **Ryan Lynch** – Staff Writer, Orlando Business Journal  
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Jessica Brazier knows there's potential for increased equity and diversity in health care.

AdventHealth's recently named vice president and chief diversity and inclusion officer oversees initiatives for the Altamonte Springs-based nonprofit health system's nationwide network of care.

One of the most important things she says will help the success of those diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives is being connected to business strategies led by CEOs, she told *Orlando Business Journal*.



Jessica Brazier

JIM CARCHIDI/OBJ

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"That's what gets it the right traction and momentum. Not just owned by the DEI leader, but owned by the CEO and other business leaders."

AdventHealth has done so, driven by the protests and demonstrations against racial inequality following the spring 2020 death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police. AdventHealth CEO Terry Shaw and other system leaders voiced that silence was not an option for the organization when it comes to social injustice. The system worked to include equity and diversity metrics into its strategic plans and indicators on how it can improve medical care in the communities it serves.

Additionally, Shaw established a DEI Council at AdventHealth to improve diversity in areas including hiring, executive training and supply chain opportunities. The system also seeks to create opportunities for Black professionals to develop into executive roles. It's a good business strategy, too, because it can help a company better serve its community, Brazier said.

Here, Brazier shares more about her own experiences as a Black executive and what can be done to effect positive change:

**What are some of the steps AdventHealth has taken to address health disparities for people, including those who are Black?** We can't leave it to chance that we will see progress just because we have this sacred mission and these service standards. We have to take intentional steps to make inclusion a reality for our patients and team members. One of the steps we have taken is to appoint Dr. Alric Simmonds as chief health equity officer of our organization in 2020. He's addressing well-documented health disparities we see. Some of these relate to race and ethnicity, and what we know is communities of color often are at higher risk of being uninsured, [they] lack access to care and often experience worse health outcomes. An illustration of this is to think about the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 [on] communities of color, even in metro Orlando.

**Have you seen more Black professionals in the C-suite as you worked in executive roles?** Yes, but it has not been without challenges. When you're one of a few Black leaders, you can feel pressure to be the spokesperson for the entire community. It's almost like the feeling of the failure or success of yourself is representative of your entire

community. That's a lot of weight to carry. To see over the years that more people have had doors opened to them, whether it's boards I'm on or different organizations I am a part of, that's definitely been a positive.

**How has that affected your own approach?** At one point in my career, I took it upon myself to counter certain stereotypes because I didn't want to be perceived as stereotypically Black. I was over careful to measure the highs and lows of my voice because I didn't want to be perceived as angry or emotional as a Black woman. I realize when I edit some of those things to my leadership style, it inhibits my creativity. It doesn't allow me to connect in a genuine way. I'm even still growing and adapting. The more we see representation in these spaces, it's easier to exist as one's genuine self.

**How optimistic are you about health care becoming more diverse as a whole?** I am extremely optimistic about this. There are three areas in the U.S. when it comes to addressing diversity, equity and inclusion: We have rich opportunities to make an impact. I can't think of an industry where DEI is more important than in health care. The other two that are big are education and criminal justice. The data that exists is irrefutable. When you want to rally community and business leaders around real change, if you have good data, that's often a great starting point because you can start measuring progress. You can't manage what you can't measure.

**What do you expect to be a challenge with diversity, equity and inclusion?** A historic challenge is moving from theory to action. Even in recent months or years, how do you move from the lip service or trending aspects of it to real actionable behavior change? Inclusion efforts that don't just emphasize ideology but do the necessary groundwork to make breakthroughs in terms of evolving their behavior. How do we make it implementable? As a manager, one of my specialties is change management, and I'm looking forward to implementing some of that rigor through DEI and the maturity model we have as an organization so we can reach our vision in the space and incrementally make progress.

**What can your industry do to hire more Black professionals?** Pipeline development, where we can expose students in universities or even high schools to the possibilities that exist in this space. That could be a great way to bridge the gap that limits possibilities for a lot of people in our communities. When you are building those talent pipelines, you don't necessarily see the impact overnight. A lot of times, it is years in the making when that student graduates and becomes ready to work. Whether it's through partnerships with educational partners or others, we look forward to attracting a workforce that really reflects our community.

**How has your company worked to erase gaps for Black professionals and suppliers?** Terry Shaw created a systemwide DEI Council, a diverse group of leaders representing all our markets. Collectively, the council has shaped our organizational DEI strategies, from our hiring practices to succession planning to leadership development to supply chain practices. We also have taken our team members' input to heart as we go on this journey. We've improved our plans based on their feedback and what's important to them, and when we find an opportunity, we create specific plans to close the gap. As a result, we are seeing progress in representation of team members at all levels, including management and executives.

**What advice do you have for businesses to address diversity and systemic racism?**

Diversity and inclusion used to be relegated to an HR matter. Now, so many companies are looking at it as a business strategy, how it can be integrated across every aspect of our organization. More than that, organizations that were focusing on checking the box on traditional representation – like how many token this person or token that person – now are starting to expand the conversation to inclusiveness, belonging and, in our area, health equity and community impact. That trend married with the shift in consciousness we are seeing in our environment makes the potential for positive change really rich.

**Jessica Brazier**

vice president and chief diversity and inclusion officer, AdventHealth

- Age: 36
- Description: Nonprofit health system with nearly \$11 billion in operating revenue and 50 hospital campuses in nine states
- Total employees: Roughly 80,000
- Contact: [adventhealth.com](http://adventhealth.com)

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