

# Celebrating milestones of hope at RiverStone Health

By Eric Owen

This year, RiverStone Health celebrates 50 years as the Yellowstone County Health Department and 40 years providing community health center services.

I recently had a moment to reflect on those decades of service during a meeting about the care RiverStone Health provides to people living with HIV. One of the managers said, “for the first time we are having to start thinking about providing senior care for our clients”.

That sentence stopped me in my tracks. My mind went back to the 80s and 90s, when “HIV-positive” conversations went something like, “my bucket list is” or “have you heard about this new promising medication”, or in some cases “you’ve managed to make it five years past your diagnosis without the use of any medications – you’re a unicorn”. I remembered the lack of gay elder mentors for a whole generation of young gay men. A generation had been decimated by the AIDS crisis. If you have been directly or indirectly impacted by HIV, maybe you can relate.

My feelings then turned to a sense of hope. I thought to myself how far we have come in a relatively short time. Many people justifiably felt the healthcare system in the 80s and 90s was negligently slow in responding to the AIDS crisis. We now need to consider how we serve an aging population with HIV, something that 40 years ago was nowhere on the radar.

In that moment I also couldn’t help but feel overwhelming gratitude for the healthcare workers, often community health center workers, who stood by the community and got us to this point where people living with HIV can imagine for themselves, and have, a long healthy life.

Community health centers and public health departments are on the front lines of bringing dignity and health to millions of people across the country. They provide primary care, dental, behavioral health, pharmacy and social service safety nets. The compassionate people who choose to work in community health centers and in public health departments are often the first to intervene when emergencies, pandemics or social injustices happen.

Daily, I witness examples of our RiverStone Health care teams setting aside stigma and meeting our most vulnerable neighbors where they are with dignity and respect, regardless of their circumstances or backgrounds. At RiverStone Health, the patients are the heroes. We are facilitators, helping them overcome the day-to-day obstacles that everyone experiences from time to time.

People often ask me what RiverStone Health does. In that meeting with our HIV services team, I found my answer: “We help people find hope”. Hope that everyone has the right to be healthy and live a long, fulfilling life. Hope that everyone has the strength within them and opportunity to overcome life’s challenges. Hope that everyone gets the dignity and respect they deserve. And most of all, hope that there’s a better future waiting for everyone to claim it.

This week, as we mark National Health Center Week during this year of milestone anniversaries, please join me in sharing your appreciation to the dedicated team across all RiverStone Health services who selflessly give so much to help make our community a better, healthier place for all of us to live in.

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