

# Safety Net Medical Director Values Making a Difference for Patients

Cook County CMO sees advocating for universal health care as “side job” **By Delia O’Hara**

**Dr. Fegan is responsible for Cook County Health’s medical practices, and she helps set the course on policy but sees her “side job” as advocating for universal health care for all.**

**C**LAUDIA FEGAN MD, chief medical officer (CMO) for Cook County Health, a safety net public healthcare provider with a \$4 billion budget, says that a little megalomania may have gone into her choosing her present job, which she has held for a decade.

Dr. Fegan, an internal medicine specialist who still sees patients, notes that while she might make a difference in the life of every patient she treats, “as a CMO, I have an opportunity to make a difference for lots of patients.”

That’s her favorite part of her work. “I like to make a difference,” Dr. Fegan says.

As CMO, she is responsible for Cook County Health’s medical practices, and she helps set the course on policy. She says the most challenging part of her job is dealing with bureaucracy, “all the things that get in the way of people getting what they need when they need it.”

Patients who could afford to go to other health care facilities “fall in our door” from time to time, usually because they have experienced some kind of trauma, Dr. Fegan says. Some are surprised, she says, by “what good care they receive” at Cook County Health, “how kind and knowledgeable and good at their jobs” the doctors and nurses are.

Dr. Fegan’s “side job,” she says, is advocating for universal health care. She is the president of the Health & Medicine Policy Research Group (HMPRG), an independent policy center that works to achieve health equity for all, and she is the national coordinator of Physicians for a National Health Program (PNHP), a physician organization that advocates for single-payer national health insurance.

“We spend enough money on health care in the United States that we could actually provide care to everyone who needs it,” she says.


Dr. Fegan did her residency in internal medicine at now-closed Michael Reese Hospital, where she was president of the medical staff, and then



medical director of the hospital. She partnered in private practice with the late Quentin Young MD, a well-known Chicago physician and activist, who founded the HMPRG, and was also a PNHP national coordinator.

“I was always an advocate,” Dr. Fegan says. “It’s a privilege to be able to take care of patients. It’s the responsibility, I believe, of physicians to advocate for their needs.”

Dr. Fegan grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Her mother was a social worker, a Jew who fled Nazi Germany in 1939. Her father was a labor organizer from Jamaica. Dr. Fegan was the valedictorian of her class at John Marshall Harlan High School. She says she originally wanted to be a marine biologist, but “I was smart, and everyone said, ‘You should be a doctor.’”

Dr. Fegan lives in the Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago. She has two grown children with her late husband, Daniel Fegan, who was a high school English teacher in the Chicago Public Schools. In her spare time, Dr. Fegan says, she loves to travel, cook, and “to be in the water.” 

## Career Highlights

**CLAUDIA FEGAN** obtained her undergraduate degree from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and her medical degree from the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago. Becker’s Health Care this year named her one of 149 Black Health Leaders to Know, and she was also the 2017 recipient of the Paul Cornely Award for her health care activism. Dr. Fegan says she is most proud of her two children, who have “followed their dreams,” and of her work as chief medical officer at Cook County Health, where, she says, “we have the privilege of taking care of everyone who comes through our door.”