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## Lawrence honored for promoting culture of health

By Paul Tennant ptennant@eagletribune.com 2 hrs ago



CARL RUSSO/Staff photo Lawrence celebrated receiving the Culture of Health Prize from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on Thursday night at the Lawrence Senior Center. From left are: Mayor Daniel Rivera; Carrie Carroll, deputy director of the RWJF Culture Health at the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, who presented the award; Clare Gunther, former director of development for the Lawrence YWCA; Wendy Barr, MD, of the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center; Mary O'Brien, executive director of the YWCA of Greater Lawrence; Vilma Lora of the YWCA, coordinator of the Mayor's Health Task Force, who is holding the award; state Sen. Barbara L'Italien, who presented a citation from the Senate; Martha Velez, executive director of the Lawrence Senior Center; Rose Gonzalez and Tracy Sopchak, both of GroundWork Lawrence; and Amy Weatherhee of ValleyWorks Career Center.

LAWRENCE — It was Lawrence's turn to bask in victory and success Thursday night.

The Immigrant City was honored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for its efforts to promote a culture of health. The Culture of Health Prize was sought by 340 communities throughout the nation.

Only eight received it.

"It was quite obvious to me that Lawrence does stand out," Carrie Carroll, deputy director of the Robert Wood Johnson Culture of Health Prize program, told the political leaders, health care providers and civic activists who attended the celebration at the Lawrence Senior Center.

Carroll praised the city's efforts to improve its school system, which is still in state receivership but making progress on test scores. She said she and other evaluators with the foundation were impressed with educators' initiatives in working with the families of students.

She also lauded Lawrence's commitment to providing more affordable housing. A video showed mill buildings that have been converted into homes.

The city's intention of "creating health for everyone" and the use of partnerships between public and private sectors impressed the foundation, she said.

Mayor Daniel Rivera and Mary O'Brien, executive director of the YWCA, both said that creating a culture of health in Lawrence has resulted from cooperation between the city and nonprofit groups.

Vilma Lora, for example, serves as director of social justice initiatives for the YWCA of Greater Lawrence and as coordinator of the Mayor's Health Task Force.

Achieving a culture of health in Lawrence has been "many years in the making," Rivera said.

"We have a perception problem," he said, noting that in the eyes of some people, "there are no opportunities here." Many people, the mayor said, are working hard to change that perception.

“It makes my job a lot easier,” he said.

O’Brien said the YWCA and other nonprofit groups committed to bettering the city started working together more closely 20 years ago.

“We had to break out of our silos and become partners,” she said.

O’Brien credited Dr. Dean Cleghorn, senior vice president of the Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, with bringing the groups together.

“He moved us forward,” she said.

The Greater Lawrence Family Health Center brings many physicians to Lawrence who are completing their residencies, she said.

She also credited Cleghorn with bringing physicians to Lawrence to do research.

Dr. Wendy Barr, who trained at the center from 1999 to 2002 and is now a faculty member there, said the residency program has transformed Lawrence from being “severely underserved” by medical doctors to “underserved” in the opinion of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Wisconsin, is the largest philanthropic organization dedicated exclusively to health. The \$25,000 Culture of Health Prize will be divided among the YWCA and other nonprofit groups that collaborated to gain the distinction.

The other communities that received the Culture of Health Prize for 2015 are Bridgeport, Connecticut; the Bronx; Everett, Massachusetts; Kansas City; Menominee Nation in northeastern Wisconsin; Spartanburg County, South Carolina; and Waaswaaganing Anishinaabeg (Lac du Flambeau Tribe), also in Wisconsin.

State Sen. Barbara L’Italien, D-Andover, whose district includes Lawrence, presented a citation approved by the Senate to congratulate the city. U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Warren sent a video, in which she said, “I wish I could be there in person. This award is a big deal.”