

Two Health Care Experts Join PLSE Board, Emphasizing Criminal Records as a Public Health Crisis

August 7, 2020 – Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE) announced today that Ana Pujols McKee, executive vice president and chief medical officer of The Joint Commission, and Evan Figueroa-Vargas, a Certified Recovery Specialist and a National Certified Peer Specialist, have joined the PLSE Board of Directors. Both were elected as a part of PLSE’s deepening engagement with public health centers and the medical community as ways of reaching, and helping, low-income people with criminal records.

“PLSE is honored to have these two remarkable people join us,” said Ryan Allen Hancock, Chair of the PLSE Board. “Evan came to us in 2012 for help cleaning up his record, and his energy and drive to help others overcome the obstacles in their paths are inspirational; and almost everyone in healthcare today knows of Dr. Ana McKee because of her relentless pursuit of quality health care, especially for people who have historically not had access to it. They greatly expand our organization’s perspective, depth and breadth, and our reach to networks and communities with which we are eager to partner.”

Launching its Pardon Project in September 2018, PLSE set its four-year objective of generating 2,000 pardon applications each year from low-income Philadelphians – audacious by current numbers, but small when compared to the 100,000 who have turned their lives around and find their potentials so drastically limited by their past. The only way to reach so many is to work through networks that are already active and trusted in the neighborhoods where they live and work. Health care is surely one of the best.

Named one of the Top 25 Minority Executives in Healthcare in both 2014 and 2020 and connected with physicians and medical centers across the country, Dr. Ana McKee has very deep roots in Philadelphia, having served as the chief medical officer and associate executive director at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center and a member of the University of Pennsylvania’s faculty prior to The Joint Commission. She is also a former board member of the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council, Public Health Management Corporation, and the Philadelphia AIDS Consortium, and obtained her medical degree from Hahnemann Medical College and Hospital in Philadelphia.

“Today in America,” Dr. McKee said, “criminal records exclude millions of people from engaging fully in community and social life. They keep financial stability out of the reach of individuals and their families, for generations. That’s why I believe criminal records are a key determinant of public health, and one that the health profession can and must help address.”

Evan Figueroa-Vargas became involved with the criminal justice system as a result of health care gone wrong – a dependence on painkillers that lead to an addiction in 2006 – and he is currently seeking a pardon for crimes he committed in 2007. After his release from prison, he earned his GED, then an Associate’s Degree from the Community College of Philadelphia and his Bachelor’s Degree from Eastern University, and expects to receive his Master’s in Social Work from Widener University within the next year. An analyst with the City of Philadelphia’s Department of Behavioral Health, he has been an active member of the PLSE Pardon Project Steering Committee. His extensive volunteer service, focused on people in recovery with a focus on equity and inclusion, has resulted in Evan receiving many

awards and recognitions and being featured in Philadelphia Magazine, and stories covered by WHYY, ABC6, Billy Penn, and other news outlets.

“As I come to the end of a nine-year educational journey,” said Figueroa-Vargas, “I worry that no matter how much I demonstrate hard work and dedication, my criminal conviction will continue to be a barrier to me. My career goal is to be part of the solution for Philadelphians struggling with substance use disorder and homelessness. I want to be a part of the change that creates an equitable and safe Philadelphia for my wife and children. I am proud to join an organization that is so energetically and creatively working toward that future.”

Beyond their connections to health and behavioral health and their passions for social equity, both McKee and Figueroa-Vargas had their parents move from Puerto Rico to Philadelphia, where they grew up. Both are also fluent in Spanish. Expanding its engagement with and service to Philadelphia’s Latinx communities is a major priority for PLSE, and both are excited to help realize that goal.

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ABOUT PLSE: PLSE provides free legal representation to low income residents of Philadelphia whose criminal records are holding them back from achieving their potential as productive, contributing citizens. The services include seeking expungements in criminal court and pardons from the Governor, educating elected, civic and community leaders, creating community-based Pardon Hubs, and empowering under-resourced communities to seek a greater voice and needed systemic reforms. PLSE is a recipient of the Barra Award as an Exemplary Non-Profit Organization.