

Racism and coronavirus add stress to already vulnerable communities

OLIVIA RICHTER (PRODUCER): Hello and welcome to Big and Little, the podcast of Boston Children's Museum.

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OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Boston families and families across the country are grappling with many challenges right now that create anxiety, uncertainty and stress. Parents and caregivers are searching for ways to understand and talk to kids about protests, racism, and violence while still managing day-to-day life in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Low-income and minority communities have been hit the hardest by these issues. Today, Carole speaks with Manny Lopes, the CEO of the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center and a leader in community health care. Manny's career has revolved around improving health care outcomes for vulnerable populations and communities.

Without further ado, Carole and Manny, take it away.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Hi, Manny. This is Carole. It's great to have you here. I'm just going to first introduce you to our listeners.

Manny Lopes has been the CEO of the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center since 2012. And prior to that, he worked at the Center for over 20 years in many different roles as a researcher starting, I think, at 18. Is that right?

MANNY LOPES: That is correct.

CAROLE: And then in human resources, operations, and then as the VP and CIO-- and of course, Manny, you were born and raised in East Boston and attended college at Lesley and Northeastern University, so a real born and bred Bostonian.

MANNY: I am. And you could probably tell from my accent.

CAROLE: Well, it sounds pretty good to me. But I just first want to thank you so much. I can't imagine a person who is more busy at this moment, as you have such a huge health center and so many patients. But would you mind starting by telling us a little bit about the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center?

MANNY: Sure, I'd love to. And thank you, Carole, for this wonderful invitation to be part of your podcast. East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, we are a large community health center. We are a federally-qualified health center, which means that we do receive some federal funding. For us, it's small, given our operations budget, which is \$165 million. We receive about \$5 million in federal funds. But more importantly, it gives us the opportunity to say that we serve everyone who walks through our doors, regardless if they have insurance or not, whether they live in East Boston or not, and whether English is their first language or not.

Our service area includes, of course, East Boston but also Chelsea, Revere, Everett, Winthrop, and parts of Malden. But we see patients from all across the state. For one reason or another, they find their way back here to East Boston Neighborhood Health Center.

About 1,200 employees. We have some unique programs, like a 24/7 emergency department. So we never close. We have an elderly program called the PACE program that has housing, transportation, and food services, an all-inclusive program for the elderly, and many, many other programs.

CAROLE: So it's almost like you have a kind of a wraparound model where you can provide many different services out of one center.

MANNY: Yeah, that's correct, all grounded on primary care. But we try to bring all the other services into one campus area, if you would. We do have locations though, in Revere and also in Winthrop.

CAROLE: So at the moment, you're really at the hub of a number of different issues. If I could, I just wanted to start with talking about the current situation we're in, having experienced the killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and the others. The communities you serve that you just named really are enduring both the harshest realities of racism and also the harshest effects of the coronavirus pandemic. How are they coping? And how are you and your staff coping during this incredibly challenging time?

MANNY: Yeah, it is very challenging, I think, for many of our patients as well as our staff because 50% of our staff come from the communities we serve. So we're really proud of that. And what I've heard from both groups is that quite a bit of stress, anxiety, people are, of course, angry. And people are feeling exhausted.

I think, typically to racism, we've dealt with this pain and struggle for many generations. And I think we all had big hopes, or at least the prior generation had big hopes in terms of the Civil Rights Movement and what was accomplished at that time and how we got a chance to move the dial. And then, of course, after electing our first Black president, we thought we moved the dial just a little bit further, even though for many of us, we also knew that that wasn't the panacea that meant everything had changed.

We knew there was still problems out there. But we felt like we were making progress.

And today it feels like we've turned back the clock quite a bit. And people are really struggling with that and trying to figure out what change needs to happen to truly deal with the inequities that we know have always existed but now has a magnifying glass on it.

CAROLE: You said yesterday when we had a chance to catch up that really powerful phrase, I thought, was, systemic racism requires seismic change. And you had a lot to say about that. I just wonder if you could elaborate a little bit for our listeners what your thoughts are on that.

MANNY: Yeah, my pleasure. And I think I also told you that I was not necessarily an expert. But this is just based on my personal and professional experience, that I think we need to do more than just put words on a piece of paper or even just writing checks to community-based organizations.

I think now it's really the time for our elected officials and business leaders and many others within the community to just-- it's time for us to really take a pause. And we talked about getting informed and learning about the history of racism in our country.

But then I think the important work of putting together an action plan, whether it's a two-point plan, three-point plan, four-point plan, five-point plan, whatever that may be. And let's be completely transparent about that.

And any good plan always begins with data. And we should look at what the data looks like today in our education systems, in our health care systems, in our businesses, our boards, our sea-level offices. And then let's decide whether that's acceptable. And more than likely, and hopefully, I think many will look at this, and based on what we're hearing across the country, given how people are coming together and

saying this is a problem and we do need to change, then let's set some goals. And let's work towards those goals.

And again, let's be transparent about the entire process and be honest with ourselves around some of the challenges of meeting those goals. And let's work together.

CAROLE: Such good advice. The communities, just following on from that, that you serve, particularly across the country, we know have really been hit hard by the pandemic, which I think highlights all of the inequities that we were talking about. Clearly, a lot of people who live in East Boston, Chelsea, et cetera, work on the front lines, essentially, in essential businesses. And I know that there has been a lot of suffering from the pandemic.

We've read a lot about Chelsea. How are you dealing with that at your particular center? What are your thoughts about that?

MANNY: Yeah, this has been challenging for our community, the loss of jobs, the loss of child care. And then it has been difficult for many of our patients as well as our staff. It really hit home.

And then of course, the housing situation. As we know, the costs of living in Boston or in the greater Boston area is quite high. And so there are multiple families living in one apartment. And that's been really challenging when you're trying to-- if you've been exposed to the virus and you need to self-isolate or self-quarantine.

So we've heard from our patients in terms of how difficult that could be. And then the difficulties of, if you're in one of these essential jobs, you may not always have sick time or paid time off. So taking days off, especially if you're the breadwinner, can be really challenging. And you're living for every paycheck. So that's been challenging. But what we've also seen is significant spread. And our positive rate is quite high in East Boston and Chelsea as well as in Revere. And that's been difficult as well, just getting people tested but also getting people the care and treatment that they need and making sure they're not exposing others to the virus.

One of the things that we're concerned about now is what we're calling cold zones, so areas of the community or the neighborhood where people aren't getting tested. So we're looking at our testing rate. We've expanded capacity, testing capacity. But we're still seeing pockets within our communities that haven't been tested. And that has me really concerned, particularly as we begin to think about a second wave.

CAROLE: So you're doing testing, I presume, at your center.

MANNY: We have five testing locations, actually. We're doing a drive-thru testing and walk-through testing. And then our emergency room does testing 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

CAROLE: So you have plenty of testing. So I can see why the cold zone. Do you have any thoughts about why that's happening? Are people worried about coming out to be tested?

MANNY: Yeah, I think it's a combination of things. People are concerned about coming out. So we've asked them to shelter in place. And they're following the rules.

CAROLE: Right.

MANNY: But they're again, living in crowded situations, and may not want to get tested because I think they're not sure what they do with those results, particularly if they're positive. How do you go back to the family that may be hosting you to say, I've tested positive, and I may have exposed you to this virus? And then again, going back to-- many of these individuals are essential employees and may be concerned about their jobs. And then we do serve a large undocumented population. And the concern

around their immigration status and what would happen if they are positive-- and can they, should they access, particularly, health care services, given their immigration status?

CAROLE: Wow, you have a lot on your plate over there. I think they're probably all very glad that they have someone like you leading at this really difficult time. I know you know Boston Children's Museum. And you've been to the museum with your sons. And so I know you're aware of our focus, which of course, is on kids and families.

And this time and place in our history, and also with the pandemic, has really taken a toll on parents and kids. And I just wonder if you could talk a little bit about how the pandemic has impacted children and their parents and grandparents as they've tried to manage this difficult time being at home.

MANNY: Yeah, I guess I can speak from experience. I have a 13-year-old and a 17-year-old at home. And I know for us, it's trying to control screen time.

CAROLE: Yeah.

MANNY: It's what I call device management.

[LAUGHTER]

I believe they're following the rules in terms of how much time they can spend on video games and watching TV. But it is challenging. And I'm blessed. And we have the opportunity, we have a yard. So the kids can go out and play in the yard. But I know for some of our families living in East Boston and Chelsea and Revere, they don't have the same resources. And the parks at one point during this pandemic were not available to them.

So I can't imagine-- I can imagine as a kid if this happened when I was living here in East Boston, I'm sure my mom would struggle to try to find activities and help me with all the energy as a young boy that I have. But yeah, I think people are struggling to try to figure out-- concerned about education. Kids have been out of school for a long time. And what does that mean if they're able to go back in September? And are they going to continue? Are they going to be able to keep up with some of their peers who potentially have more resources, particularly those living outside of the Boston area? So I'm sure that's a concern for them.

And of course exercise, that's always-- as a health care provider, we know childhood obesity is another problem that we're faced with here in this country. And exercise is an important part of staying healthy. So we're concerned about that. And then exercise is also important for the mental state. And so we're concerned about that as well.

So there's a lot of things for us to be concerned about. I know the Children's Museum, the Boston Children's Museum is a great place. And as you said, it was one of my kids' favorite places to go when we went into downtown Boston. And you have a lot to offer and definitely give kids and families the opportunity to release some of that energy but to learn and play. I can tell you all types of stories about-- [LAUGHS] some of the favorite activities that we used to have over there.

CAROLE: OK, well, we'll definitely do that. So you mentioned the schools, opening the schools. And we just saw some of the criteria that's coming out about the complications of opening schools. I mean, as a health professional, you must be able to see both sides of this, that-- just everything you mentioned. The kids really need to get back to their friends and back to some sort of routine. But as a health professional, you're probably worried about the COVID spread. So how do you think about that in your mind as we approach the Fall?

MANNY: I think that's a great question. And I'm not sure if anyone really has the answers right now. I think until there's a vaccine, I don't think anyone is going to feel completely safe. I think we are-- I think everyone's trying their best to try to keep everyone safe, whether that's masking or the social distance. But none of this is foolproof or 100% proof. And even a vaccine is not 100% proof. But we hope it'll be in the 90 percentile.

We're going to have to see how this works and change as we go. I think what we've heard from the governor and the mayor is watching the data very carefully. And if we think something's not working, I think we need everyone's flexibility and understanding that we would have to change and go into a different mode, including going back into sheltering in place.

But I think we need to try something because what we do know is that we need kids back in the classroom--

CAROLE: Yeah.

MANNY: --for a variety of reasons. That's an important part of their maturity and growing up. And I think having them back in the classroom is right decision. But how that looks and how we do that, we have to test it.

CAROLE: With all of this and the challenges that families are facing right now, what are you telling your patients about how do they find resilience, how do they find hope? What kind of advice would you give to your patients and, of course, our listeners about, what should we hold on to this summer and fall as we travel through this?

MANNY: Yeah, I'm not a provider. So I don't see patients. But I know what I've been saying to my family and friends and my own kids as well as our staff here at the Health Center is that we have to accept what we've just been handed, which is a really difficult situation and, of course, an unprecedented crisis in the pandemic. But there's opportunities here for us to spend time with family, really think about what's important to us, take care of ourselves throughout this process.

I know for me, I've shared with our staff and our teams things that I've been doing to stay healthy and to stay in the right state of mind. And that includes meditation, exercising, spending time with my kids, particularly playing board games, which has been really fun. So I get a chance to reconnect with them at a different level, particularly teenage boys.

So I think this is, like I mentioned earlier around the racism, this is an opportunity for us to really pause and think about what's important to us right now, while we're trying to also, of course, deal with this crisis.

CAROLE: That's such great advice. And speaking of your two sons, I was just wondering what you think they would say to us about their hopes for the future and what this moment in time might offer to us for growth and change.

MANNY: Yeah, I think for my 17-year-old, who's probably in this stage of his life where he's starting to really understand what it means to be Black in America, I think for him, he's struggling a little bit more than my 13-year-old. And I think my 13-year-old will eventually get there as well. And we have these conversations.

Again, I'm very blessed that I have my wife and my kids. And we have dinner together often, now because I to get home on time, dinner. We have these conversations about, what does it mean to be a family. And what does it mean to be a man of color in this type of environment?

And I think for them, there is a lot of stress and anxiety and some uncertainty. But the great news about kids, I think they're, as we know, resilient. But I think they also have hope. And I think they understand that it begins with them. I know my 17-year-old is anxious to get involved.

And we were at one of the protests on Sunday. And I think for him, he knows he needs to be part of that change. And he needs to get himself involved and get engaged in order for change to happen. And as a parent, I'm excited about that. But I'm also, as a parent, really nervous about him.

And what does that mean for him when he goes off to college and as he grows up in this country? So I feel like I need to be doing the same thing and making sure we push this as hard as we can to get the change that we all need, that we know we need to make and just to create better equality across the board.

CAROLE: Manny, thank you so much, not only for talking to us today and sharing so much with us, but also the incredible work you're doing in East Boston with your patients. And the very best also to your family, to your two sons and your wife, and of course your staff, who sounds like they just walk on water. And we're very lucky that we have you in Boston. And I join you in hoping for a change at this point in time and going forward.

So thanks so much for being on the Big and Little podcast today.

MANNY: Thank you, Carole. Thank you for the invitation. And thank you for everything you do. I'm blessed to have this job. And I'm blessed to be part of this community. And again, thank you for all the memories at the Children's Museum.

Let me share with you the three favorite activities for us at the Children's Museum because I can't get off this call-- the three-story climbing structure.

CAROLE: Which is still there--

MANNY: It was always my kids' favorite.

CAROLE: --and even bigger.

MANNY: I was always to get in. Yep. Bubbles.

CAROLE: Bubbles are still there.

MANNY: Yeah. Yeah, from the three-story structure to the bubbles. And then my favorite exhibit was Boston Black and the fact that you played Cape Verdean music.

CAROLE: Oh, good. Well, you'll be happy to we're renovating that exhibit. We're just planning it. So I'll keep you in the loop as that evolves.

MANNY: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

CAROLE: Thanks so much, Manny. Take good care.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

OLIVIA (PRODUCER): Thanks for listening. That's it for Big and Little. We'll be back soon with more. So follow us wherever you get your podcasts.

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