

The background features the Bowles Rice logo, which consists of a stylized map of the United States. The map is composed of several overlapping shapes in shades of blue and yellow. The text "Bowles Rice" is positioned in the upper right corner of the map area.

Bowles Rice

VIEWS & VISIONS

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Health Equity

A Family Legacy and Enduring Passion for Reducing Health Care Disparities



Robert A. James
Highmark Health

Robert A. James is the Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Corporate Strategies for Allegheny Health Network/Highmark Health, a national, blended health organization that includes one of America's largest Blue Cross Blue Shield insurers and a growing regional hospital and physician network. Based in Pittsburgh, Highmark Health serves millions of customers nationwide. James' role includes implementing and advising upon Highmark Health a comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion strategy. James serves on many boards, including Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf's Advisory Council for Diversity, Inclusion, and Small Business Opportunities.

As one of a handful of Black physicians practicing in Pittsburgh during the 1950s, my father grew acutely aware of the health disparities that existed in the steel mill community he proudly served.

My dad is a role model who was ahead of his time, pioneering ways that were novel in those days to reduce health care gaps. Over the course of his 50+ year career, he started one of the first multi-specialty outpatient urgent care centers open seven days a week and made house calls for those who couldn't get to a doctor. He hosted and mentored diverse medical students and collaborated with community partnering organizations.

My dad's passion to reduce health disparities led to my own commitment and life's work. In my role as Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) for Highmark Health, I have the opportunity to advance the health equity and DEI strategy for not only our employees but also the customers and communities we serve.



Health Equity is a Business Imperative for Health Plans

Today, Medicaid trends reflect that an increasing number of states will only do business with organizations that have achieved a national standard for delivering high quality, equitable health care. And for health plans like Highmark, health equity and DEI initiatives and accreditations are table stakes when responding to requests for proposals, winning new business and retaining existing business.

The Health Equity Accreditation (HEA) standards are one such measurement developed by the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA). The HEA focuses on the concrete, tangible ways a health plan is progressing on its journey to:



Doctor James (the author's father) being celebrated by a medical school preceptorship program in front of his urgent care center.

- Build an internal culture that supports the organization's external health equity work.
- Collect data that helps the organization create and offer language services and provider networks that are mindful of individuals' cultural, sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and linguistic needs.
- Identify opportunities to reduce health inequities and improve care.

Highmark Health is proud to be recognized for its positive strides in this area, including a recent honor by the NCQA for the Multicultural Healthcare Distinction award for Highmark's Medicaid plan in Pennsylvania.

Integrating DEI Throughout the Fabric of our Organization

With health care expenditures hovering at nearly 20 percent of gross domestic product according to CMS.gov, Highmark Health views health equity and DEI initiatives as mission imperatives as we advance the quality of health care for generations to come.

At Highmark Health, our organization is proud to advance DEI through:

- A whole-person approach to care, meeting the unique physical, mental and social needs each population faces.
- Dedicated leadership at the board level and a national advisory council to implement best practices.
- Required diversity training at all levels.
- Ensuring minority talent representation across attraction, hiring, development and retention.
- A focus on supplier and provider inclusion initiatives.
- Surveying the DEI perceptions of our 37,000-member team.
- The achievement of a 100% score in Highmark West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Delaware for the Human Rights Campaign's Corporate Equality Index (CEI) and Disability:IN's Disability Equality Index (DEI).
- Quarterly reporting to senior leadership to ensure DEI progress and action planning.

No one individual or organization can tackle health equity alone, which is why we're working with our customers, providers, suppliers, workforce and community partners to create better health for all.

For more information about Highmark Health's health equity and DEI initiatives and recognitions, visit [HighmarkHealth.org](https://www.highmarkhealth.org). 

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Enterprise Equitable Health Institute team members work to optimize the wellbeing of all, while reducing the disparities in health and health care experienced by minoritized members and patients.



Highmark supported Juneteenth events and activities throughout its footprint in 2022, including events in Bethlehem, Harrisburg, York, Pittsburgh, Johnstown and Central Pennsylvania.