



Profile

Chiquita Brooks-LaSure: innovative US federal health director

In her first job after graduate school, Chiquita Brooks-LaSure was working at the White House Office of Management and Budget when she ventured from Washington, DC, USA, to see health policy in action at a community health centre in Montana. Parents had brought their children to the clinic to enrol them into a new health insurance plan called the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). The visit made a lasting impression and "really excited me about the possibilities of what this would mean for children that have no health insurance", she recalled almost 20 years later. It would be one of many experiences where she helped bring new health programmes to fruition. "I like breaking new ground, and pushing to the next frontier", she said.

In May, 2021, the US Senate approved Brooks-LaSure as President Joe Biden's choice to lead the US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). The agency runs CHIP, Medicaid for people on low income, the Medicare programme for older or disabled citizens, and the health insurance marketplaces created by the Affordable Care Act (ACA). She presides over an agency with a US\$1 trillion budget that provides health insurance to more than 154 million people.

At the Office of Management and Budget, Brooks-LaSure also worked with states to expand Medicaid access and after the 9/11 attack she helped dislocated workers afford health coverage by using federal tax credits. After Barack Obama was elected President, she helped craft the ACA as a health policy staffer with the Subcommittee on Health of the US House of Representatives' Committee on Ways and Means. Brian Cookstra was then the communications director for the committee's chair, and valued Brooks-LaSure's advice on how to answer reporters' questions about the ACA. "Chiquita has this incredible ability to not just explain the details of a specific policy, but to be able to keep the focus on what that means for the people who rely on these programmes", said Cookstra, who is now based at the Clinton Foundation.

A month after Obama signed the ACA into law in 2010, Brooks-LaSure joined the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to help implement it. She was director of coverage policy at the Office of Health Reform and then moved to the newly created Center for Consumer Information and Insurance Oversight at the CMS as its deputy director for policy. In 2014, she left the Obama administration for the private sector, working at Breakaway Policy Strategies and then as a managing director at Manatt Health Solutions, both health policy consulting firms. Shortly after Biden won the 2020 presidential race, she served as co-team leader for his HHS transition team. Her experience with CMS programmes "gives Chiquita a range of opportunities that is pretty unparalleled [when] health care is one of President Biden's top priorities", said Kathleen Sebelius, who

served as HHS Secretary when Brooks-LaSure worked there and is now CEO of Sebelius Resources, a consulting firm. "I think she is absolutely the right person at the right time."

Born in Philadelphia, Brooks-LaSure grew up in a small town in New Jersey. In her Senate nomination hearing, she recalled that "My own hometown, a predominantly Black community where my parents still live, experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths compared to many of our surrounding communities." Tackling health-care inequities is one of her priorities. "These disparities have long existed, but COVID-19 has illuminated them in a way that is really unprecedented", she said. "While we will really be focused on what we can do administratively, there will likely be more that Congress needs to do to address these disparities."

Closing the gaps in the ACA that keep health coverage unaffordable for some Americans is another urgent need, she said. "I call it the unfinished work of the ACA." Biden's American Rescue Plan has provided assistance to reduce costs for patients. "What we're seeing in terms of the increase in coverage has been just incredible", she said. Over 2 million people have gained ACA's marketplace health coverage since February, 2021, when the Biden administration opened enrolment due to the pandemic. Brooks-LaSure wants to work with state governments and Congress on long-term solutions, including encouraging more states to accept the federal funds the ACA provides to expand Medicaid eligibility.

Brooks-LaSure earned a bachelor of arts degree in politics from Princeton University in Princeton, NJ, and a masters of public policy from Georgetown University in Washington, DC, where Judith Feder, professor of health policy and former dean of what is now the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, stoked her interest in health care. Feder said her former student stands out from previous CMS administrators: "The breadth of her experience matches the scope of CMS's responsibilities." Brooks-LaSure also considers "the people affected by the programmes she's working with, has a strong sense of what is good policy, and is able to communicate that with clarity and passion", said Feder.

Brooks-LaSure credits her parents and grandparents "with instilling in us a desire to make sure that our lives are meaningful and that we improve the lives of others". Her new role as Administrator for the CMS is "humbling and such a privilege", said Brooks-LaSure, who is the first Black woman to head the agency. "Women across the country have reached out to say how meaningful it is", she said. "And what an incredible opportunity it is for me—and I need to remember that in everything I'm doing—and make sure that I am speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves."

Susan Jaffe



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