

Cardiologist Earns Award for Serving Under-Resourced Communities



Dr. Willie E. Lawrence Jr. is an accomplished cardiologist with extensive expertise in helping underserved communities. One secret to his success, he said, is staying true to his roots as a kid who lived in the racially segregated East Side of Cleveland during the 1960s and '70s.

"When I was growing up, I had no role models who looked like me," he said. "Now when people look up my resume and see I went to Harvard, they expect certain things. But I like being in a position to dispel myths. That starts when people see a 6-foot-5-inch Black cardiologist walking in the room looking like a middle linebacker."

Lawrence practices comprehensive integrative medicine at the Corewell Health Center for Wellness in Benton Harbor, Michigan, an area with a large Black population, high levels of mortality, low income and low education levels. He has been a leader for the American Heart Association for decades, bridging the gap between the clinical setting and the community.

Lawrence has served on the Kansas City, Midwest Region and National Board of Directors. He also leads the National Hypertension Control Initiative volunteer advisory group, which promotes equitable care and lifesaving interventions to lower blood pressure.

Because of his longstanding contributions to address health equity, Lawrence is the recipient of the Louis B. Russell Jr. Memorial Award. The AHA presents the award annually for outstanding service to under-resourced communities. Lawrence will be honored May 2 during the AHA's online National Volunteer Awards [ceremony](#), which begins at 6 p.m. Central and is open for public viewing.

The award's namesake, a Black man who was the 34th person to undergo a heart transplant, survived more than six years – a world record at the time. Russell was an active AHA volunteer who promoted heart disease prevention in people and communities that needed the care before his death in 1974.

Early in his cardiology career, Lawrence was drawn to the AHA. He quickly became known as an ambassador for hypertension and stroke control, and a prevention-focused community leader. He knew other medical professionals were involved with the AHA, but what surprised him over the years was that so many nonmedical volunteers were committed.

He notes that a family connection or personal experience with cardiovascular disease is usually the driving force.

"It's no different for me than it is for many other people," he said. "Blacks are disproportionately affected, so if you are a Black American, you know someone who had a stroke or heart disease."

For Lawrence, some of those family connections include his son needing open-heart surgery at 5 months old and his mother dying of stroke-related complications.

"As a son, I remember what it was like to walk with my mother in to her appointments," he said. "I saw the disrespect doctors showed her. They wouldn't ask her anything personal, they wouldn't look at her. Before you can care for someone, you have to care about them."

Those interactions shaped how he wanted to treat his patients, adding that what goes on in a patient's home is as important as what goes on in a provider's office.

He's determined to meet people where they are and let them know they're important by showing up. He jokes that when you are the only Black cardiologist in a city, people ask you to do things and you can't say no. Another time he doesn't say no is when AHA CEO Nancy Brown calls him.

"Nancy called and asked me to chair the National Hypertension Control Initiative board. I first said "yes," then I said "What is that?"

He quickly got up to speed and helped the NHCI effort make significant strides in reducing hypertension, a condition that affects nearly half of all adult Americans. Participating health centers achieved a 12.3% improvement in blood pressure control rates, compared to just 9.3% in all Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) funded health centers.

"Willie truly walks the walk when it comes to caring for his patients and the community," said AHA CEO Nancy Brown. "He builds enduring relationships and is a role model for the next generation of cardiologists. His fervent dedication to improving health inspires people to make lifesaving changes."

Lawrence also served as an inaugural member of the Target: BP (Blood Pressure) Advisory Group. Over the past three years, 121 of the 350 NHCI health centers participated in the Target: BP annual award program and 25% of the clinics achieved Gold/Gold+ status in 2023, earned by practices that had 70 percent or more of their adult patient population's high blood pressure controlled.

He credits some of that success to outreach, community collaboration and training health care workers on accurate measurements and best practices to achieve blood pressure control.

"In many cases we get patients to the point where they are doing better than they were prior to getting their diagnosis," he said. "Heart disease isn't a disease where all patients continue to be dependent on their provider. Ultimately that is why being a cardiologist is so rewarding. It's also what gives me passion to continue to help patients restore and improve their health."

Source & Image Credit: [American Heart Association](#)

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