Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Even with Medicaid where we will pay for medications, if you have somebody that can't get medication, and we talk about it all the time, if they need that medication, if they have a chronic condition, that helps actually people get back to work too, right?

Bryant Hileman:
A hundred percent, I would say just on a personal anecdotal level of 14, 15 years of doing this, 70 or 80% of people that I personally help, they end up going back to work.

Julianne Hatton:
Hello and welcome to CHFS Community, a podcast about health and wellbeing for CHFS employees across the commonwealth. Hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander. Broadcasting from Frankfort, Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Hello CHFS, this is Eric Friedlander your Secretary of the Health and Family Services Cabinet. And today, I have with me, Bryant Hileman.

Bryant Hileman:
Hello, how are you doing today?

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
All right. All right. I hope you're doing well.

Bryant Hileman:
Doing great.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Sometimes the weather gives us context for actually when this conversation happens, and it's sort of like we just had these hot days in a row and today is gorgeous. Today is really nice.

Bryant Hileman:
Very nice break from what we just went through.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. So, Bryant, where were you born and raised? Little bit of background.

Bryant Hileman:
Yeah, actually, I was born in Paducah, but I lived over in Southern Illinois for most of my life. Actually in the second poorest county in the state of Illinois and grew up and worked all through high school in Cairo, Illinois.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Okay. All right. So just across the river down there, right?

Bryant Hileman:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Yeah. So what lured you back to Kentucky?

Bryant Hileman:
Opportunity. That's it. Just opportunity, able to start a career, start a family, start my life and just was a more welcoming, better place, honestly.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, well good. We in Kentucky are glad to hear that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
We like being the land of opportunity.

Bryant Hileman:
Thank you.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So family, so where are you settled now?

Bryant Hileman:
I'm in Paducah. Far Western Kentucky over in Paducah right across the river from Illinois.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Absolutely. We had a Commission for Children with Special Health Care Needs office there and The Quilt Museum's down there, right?
Bryant Hileman:
It is. Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's a great downtown. From maybe 15 years ago to today is amazing.

Bryant Hileman:
Night and day, night and day compared to what it was. I first moved here in 2000 and totally different atmosphere. Totally different downtown. Lot of progress.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
A lot of progress. It's a cool city. It's a cool city.

Bryant Hileman:
I love it. Absolutely love it.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. So you talk about working in community, which is what you love to do. Can you talk about what led you there? What led you to really feeling a part and wanting to be a part and maybe a change within your community?

Bryant Hileman:
Yeah, it started by the people that I really respected that I grew up with. I saw so many people in Southern Illinois who did everything right. They did everything for the right reasons, and they went through a lot of unnecessary suffering. If someone needs insulin, they're not able to go back to work. If someone's hungry, they're not able to go to work. And it was just what I felt like was unnecessary suffering and anything I could do to make softer landings, that was going to be my goal when I grew up.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's beautiful. Glad you're with the Cabinet. That's what we try to do, right?

Bryant Hileman:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So, you talk about wanting to come for a career and getting started there. So what were you interested in when you came back? What did you start doing?
Bryant Hileman:
I started when I was 22. I co-founded a non-profit here in Paducah, 501 (c) (3) nonprofit called Heart USA. And we helped people out of our homes off the kitchen table, and I was delivering pizzas at the time and would use my pizza delivery tips to make the copies. And my co-founder would use parts of his income to make the other copies. And we helped hundreds of people just out of our home. And it eventually became the model for the KPAP program, the Kentucky Prescription Assistance Program. And I've been with the Cabinet since 2008 as a consultant and organizer for the program.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh yeah. And I remember representative Jimmie Lee was a big champion.

Bryant Hileman:
He absolutely was. We got connected with Carol Baldwin in Elizabethtown. We were running parallel lives, doing the same thing we were doing over in Paducah. Got us together and took the best of both worlds there and created this program.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Which is a fantastic program. There was a health and welfare committee meeting in Northern Kentucky, and what they wanted to talk about was the KPAP program.

Bryant Hileman:
Yes, yes, absolutely. It's grown tremendously since 2008 and I would've been stunned to know 16 years ago how far and how widespread it was going to go.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It was really neat because they're like, "Well, this is such a great program. We need to make sure everybody knows about it." I'm like, "Yeah."

Bryant Hileman:
We definitely try. We definitely try. We have a broad range of community partners out there. We have faith-based groups that do this program. We have hospitals. We have free clinics, sliding scale clinics, federally qualified health centers. You name it, we can partner with you so you can help your friends and neighbors.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And talk just a little bit about the program.

Bryant Hileman:
What it is basically is the pharmaceutical companies have what's called patient assistance programs. But growing up in a rural area, sometimes the only internet you have is on your cell phone. It's very, very difficult sometimes to access those things, and it's difficult to print
paperwork at home. Printing's very expensive, and it's a mess to go through. There's no law that says that they have to do this. These are people willing and able to do it through foundations.

Bryant Hileman:
And so where it gets confusing for folks is if you have 12 different medicines, you might have 12 different manufacturers for that medicine, and there's 12 different sets of rules and qualifications. So you could imagine also going through the hardship of going to the doctor and not feeling well on top of that, having to manage all that extra stuff is really hard for people.

Bryant Hileman:
And so what we do is we try to make an extremely complicated process, just complicated. We try to organize and streamline that system where folks can contact their KPAP organization that's local to them and get the help that they need.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And that would be then associated either with the church or sometimes with a small rural hospital. You really support some of those healthcare providers.

Bryant Hileman:
Absolutely. What we saw after the ACA is that Medicare reimbursements can actually go down when we have higher remission rates. And we see that impacts our rural hospitals the most. And so what we've really tried to show and tried to really show people is that if we help with these chronic disease medications, we can keep them out of the emergency room. We can keep them out of the hospital. And that supports our rural hospitals specifically. It helps keep their Medicare funding the way it is.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And even with Medicaid, where we will pay for medications, if you have somebody that can't get medication, and we talk about it all the time, if they need that medication, if they have a chronic condition, that helps actually people get back to work too, right?

Bryant Hileman:
A hundred percent. I would say just on a personal anecdotal level of 14, 15 years of doing this, 70 or 80% of people that I personally help, they end up going back to work. They've had to take time off or they've lost their job because they had a heart attack and they were a truck driver. And when they went through the health problems and they needed their medicine, it was a roadblock for them to get back into the workforce. And we see it all the time where we help people for six months, nine months, they come back and thank us and they're back on their feet again.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Sometimes people need a helping hand to get back to where they want to be. And we need to have these programs here to help folks do that.

Bryant Hileman:
Life is tough enough without unnecessary roadblocks in the way. So it's all about trying to create a softer landing for people where they can get back on their feet.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Can you give some of the examples of folks that you actually help? Maybe some of your favorite stories that you have?

Bryant Hileman:
Absolutely. So many. I think the ones that come to mind first are seniors. They're on Medicare. They have a prescription, Medicare Part D drug prescription program benefit with their Medicare. She goes to the pharmacy, it's $5, $10 for each medicine, but then you go in one day and it's $400 because they get into what's called that donut hole. And we actually can help those seniors, especially those seniors that are taking insulin. That's sometimes four or five, $600 a month or more. We can actually get that completely free for them. So that's always a blessing and something we look forward to and something that we're happy about.

Bryant Hileman:
We also help folks out there that don't have any insurance. Maybe they're between jobs. Maybe they lost employment when COVID happened. Maybe something personal happened, and they're in the process of switching employment. We also see that a lot too. They're just in that gap, and we can help those people as well.

Bryant Hileman:
One of the favorites is helping working folks out there that do have a good job and do have good insurance. Maybe they have an insurance plan and it covers three, four, $500 of the cost of their medicine, but they're still paying out of pocket. A good example are EpiPens. You have to buy those every year, whether you use them or not, and there's about a hundred dollars out of pocket for most of the insurance that we see patients come in with. So when I help the school janitor get the EpiPen, even though he has a good job and good insurance and a good income, we're helping that person. And that's a car payment for a working person.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It is. It is. And sometimes when people have to choose between, well, I need this car for work or I need food for work. I need to be nourished to be able to get there. So it's a big deal.
Bryant Hileman:
Yes. When someone comes to you and needs medicine because they're sick, there's a good chance that they're hungry. We see them not buying groceries because they were buying their medicine. That's something that we hear every day, almost every single day. Those stories pile up, and they weigh on your heart. And so I started another nonprofit here in Paducah called Project Pomona, and we help people get food. And so we actually cook for them. We get groceries for them. And we partnered with some CHWs here where when they find out and screen from patients that leave the hospital, yeah, we can help you get your medicines, but what else do you need to be successful? What else do you need to get back into the workforce? What do you need to stay healthy? And a lot of times that top answer in the top three is food. So we do our best to try to provide food for folks.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And that's so important. I did a little street outreach here in Louisville, and some of those programs, what they do is they go out with meals and serve folks who need that out there, right?

Bryant Hileman:
Yes. I would highly recommend for anyone listening to get involved with any local food bank. It's something that will really open your eyes to what people are struggling with at times. And a lot of times, it's folks that's never had to ask for help. And they're almost embarrassed because they're in that situation through no fault of their own. So making sure you do outreach and good screening, making sure you're communicating very clearly about what needs are, that's the most important. And just being aware and being involved. Sometimes it's letting people know that someone has them in mind is the best thing that we can do.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And I've seen that so often. You're thinking about me? It makes a difference in how somebody even approaches their life.

Bryant Hileman:
It does. Knowing that someone out there has you in mind is the biggest difference maker. The other stuff is just stuff that you have to have.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right. Well, and we say, kids, the most important thing for a child is to have a caring adult in their life. But the most important thing for all of us is that is to have somebody who cares for us.

Bryant Hileman:
Absolutely.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And that's just a calling for a lot of people, and it's clearly a calling for you.

Bryant Hileman:
It is. And I was fortunate enough to be able to work with people over the years here in the Cabinet that have that same desire. They have that same emphatic heart where they go above and beyond, and they actually care about the people that they're serving. And I can't tell you how rare and special that is when you get to work with people like that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. I always say to folks inside the Cabinet and to folks we work with, we are the fortunate ones. We get to maybe make a difference in somebody's life today. How many people get to wake up every day and say that?

Bryant Hileman:
Not very many. It's very cool. And the team that we've put together the last two years especially has been just absolutely outstanding for everything that we're trying to do with this.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, in the last couple of years, we've had some pretty specific challenges. Through COVID and then the floods and tornado, you had a big impact on how we serve folks.

Bryant Hileman:
I hope so. We always believe in leading by example. We had a horrific tornado here last December in Mayfield. It's about 20 miles down the road for me. And what was very different for me with that was when that happened, that next morning, my division director found my phone number and personally texted me and said, "Hey, are you okay? Is your family okay?" And that doesn't happen at very many places. Number one, to take the time and to think about all of the programs this person has, Elizabeth Goode, and takes the time to check and make sure that I'm okay.

Bryant Hileman:
After that, I said, "Hey, I've got some volunteers. Can I go help? Can I go do something?" "Yes, absolutely. Let's raise money in the office and go. You have permission to go." And to have that trust and support in your team where when something happens, there's no time to really debate. It's just get on the ground and go. And for, I believe about six straight days, we cooked food outside of a window of a shelter where we had over 250 storm refugees, and we cooked morning and night. We actually fed the nursing home staff who were unable to leave the nursing home in Graves County. We fed all the people in the shelters, and I can't think of another job that would give me an opportunity to lead with my heart and go serve folks like that.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, that's really beautiful. And thank you for your service. It's impossible to describe the level of destruction. Going into downtown Mayfield and not being able to get your bearings.

Bryant Hileman:
Have no idea where you're at. Have no idea, have no idea. Very familiar with that area, organized a lot in that area, and it was so heartbreaking to see people, cell phones are not working. Maybe the grandpa went to one shelter and his grandkids went to another, and they don't know if each other is okay. But we did get to see a lot of happy endings after a few days where those families were getting reunited and just the relief on their face when they found out their grandson...

Bryant Hileman:
I'll never forget. There was a elderly man that was sitting by himself. And I asked him if he wanted a sandwich and he said, "I can't eat. I can't find my family." And a couple days later, his family came in on a bus, and they're crying. And despite everything going on, they had so much joy because they had each other. So you do get to participate in some of those special moments too.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That is amazing. And also then focuses on what's important and that's our relationship with each other.

Bryant Hileman:
He wasn't thinking about his house that he lost. He wasn't thinking about his possessions. He was worried about those grandkids. And as soon as he got to hug them, he was okay. He knew he was going to be okay.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Wow. And then we had the floods in Eastern Kentucky, which are also, I mean, just to see the level of destruction from the water and almost looking like some places where a tornado had come through itself and knocked down trees and houses. That was also hard to describe.

Bryant Hileman:
It is. Pictures never do it justice because the feeling that you get standing there and watching people suffer through that, it's heartbreaking, but it's also inspirational because of their determination and their will.

Bryant Hileman:
This time when I found out our friends and neighbors in Eastern Kentucky were having such a problem, again, I asked my boss, "Hey, can I go help?" And not only did they give me permission this time, some of them actually came out with me. That's amazing to me. And my boss in the
KPAP program, Jennifer Toribio Naas actually came, got a van from the Cabinet, brought supplies. So we were able to hand out backpacks, water bottles, reusable water bottles, which sometimes we forget how important that is in a disaster. And we cooked for four straight days there and had a group of four or five volunteers. We actually even partnered with the pharmaceutical company who had reps there who helped get us into some of the nonprofits in places that were feeding folks. And I believe our impact was over six counties. And we did close to 3,500 free meals in that week.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow. And the thing that I found also impressive about that is some of the response in Eastern Kentucky came from Western Kentucky. Folks who'd just been through it, yourself included, who knew what that looked like and what that impact was and almost couldn't wait to help in Eastern Kentucky.

Bryant Hileman:
That's exactly right. When you check social media, it was people saying, "Hey, these folks were here for us in December." Because I'll never forget. We're there the next morning, and we're the only people there, because everything is so destroyed. And within 48 hours, you start seeing these trucks coming in. "Where are you from? I'm from Tennessee." "I'm from Eastern Kentucky." "I'm from Indiana."

Bryant Hileman:
People run towards the problem. Because problems, they're not just problems, they're hero opportunities. And people showed up. And when that happened over there, people loaded me up with buns and goodies and stuff to take, and we had just truckloads of stuff from Western Kentucky that we were happy to bring in.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Right, right. Which was so very helpful in Eastern Kentucky. And it's one of those things that I think we talk about Team Kentucky, and we're all on the same team. And yes. And I like to say, it's like if COVID's taught us anything, it's whatever happened to one of us in the community impacts us all. And we keep learning it over and over again. But it's so true.

Bryant Hileman:
It's almost hilarious. It's so true. And sometimes we get blinded by our own lives and what's going on to really understand. But if someone is hungry on the other side of your town, even a side of town you never drive down the street of, it does impact you. It impacts your school. It impacts your kids' education. It impacts our rural hospitals, everything. So anything we can do to make those softer landings and let people know that we have them in mind and maybe sometimes even put a face to our programs, I think that's the most important thing we can do.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, I agree completely. I was briefly the chief resilience officer for the City of Louisville and what we found, it's the same thing. Our city or community is only as resilient as its least resilient population. And so when we help shore that up and we help support folks, that's another way to say we're supporting the entire community.

Bryant Hileman:
Yes, yes. There's no doubt about it because it has an impact, a trickle-down impact on every single person, whether we speak to them or we engage with them or not.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. I like to think about it as a trickle up. That helps everyone.

Bryant Hileman:
I know if they do better, I'm going to do better.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah. Oh, that's a beautiful way to say that. Yeah, that's perfect. That's perfect.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, thank you for the conversation today. This has been fun. And you have said some things that I hope speak to the folks who listen to this, because you've said it better than I've ever said it. And so I'm going to probably steal some of the things you said. But it's the difference we all make in each other's lives. That's what's real and that's what's important.

Bryant Hileman:
I believe it with my whole heart. And I believe having an emphatic heart while we serve others is the most important thing we can do. And we're just going to continue keeping on. We're almost at a billion dollars in free prescription medicine since 2009. So that's going to be our goal coming up I think next year, maybe close to next year. I think we're going to hit a billion dollars.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
We will have a big celebration then.

Bryant Hileman:
As long as we get pizza, I will be thrilled to be there.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, for me, we have to have cake too, but okay. We can do that.
Bryant Hileman:
We'll compromise. Yeah, I like cake.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That sounds good. That's a bigger party.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So again, thank you for your time. Thank you for this conversation. I hope folks who are listening enjoy, and we'll tune into other conversations. Bryant, thank you so much.

Bryant Hileman:
Thank you.

Julianne Hatton:
Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander. Produced by Julianne Hatton. Our assistant producer is Beth Fisher. Our technical director and graphic artist is Lisa Wallace. Watch for the podcast preview in your email so you'll never miss an episode. While you're at it, tell your coworkers about the show. Until next time, stay healthy, Kentucky.