

CHFS Community  
Danita Coulter, Branch Manager  
Medicaid Services  
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Secretary Eric Friedlander:

... and from your own story of finding a grave of a forebearer, and now representing this state where he is buried... across the nation.

Danita Coulter:

Yeah, it is something that, when my grandchildren are old enough to understand, I would like for them to be able to grasp the impact of that story.

Julianne Hatton:

Welcome to CHFS Community, a place where ordinary people do extraordinary work, helping Kentuckians reach their full human potential, hosted by Eric Friedlander, Secretary of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Hello, CHFS, this is your Secretary, Eric Friedlander, and today, I have the joy of having with me Danita Coulter, who's the branch manager for equity and determinants of health in Medicaid services. So just going to have a conversation today, Danita, how are you?

Danita Coulter:

I am doing well, pleasure to be here, Secretary.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Glad to have you with us today. So I always like to ask, where are you from?

Danita Coulter:

I am from a small town called Danville, Kentucky, and I have listened to one of your podcasts and heard one of my Danvillians, fellow Danvillians, on your podcast before, LaToya Payne. We are from the same small town, from Danville, population just a bit over 17,000. So that is my hometown.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Home of Centre College and Pioneer Playhouse, and all of those good things.

Danita Coulter:

Yes, I'm a Danville Admiral.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So grew up there, were your parents affiliated with the college in any way?

Danita Coulter:

No, my mom actually came from an even smaller population. She grew up in a place called Buckeye, which is just a little small farming town outside of Garrard County. It's right between the border of Garrard County and Richmond. My father actually lived in Danville, so he came from Danville, yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

All right, so you were born and raised there, went to school there?

Danita Coulter:

Absolutely, yes, lived there all my life. As far away from Danville as I ventured was Richmond, when I went to ECU.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So were you in Danville proper, or were you more in the city, or were you more in the county?

Danita Coulter:

More in the city, yes, so strictly Danvillian city. Yeah, right there in the middle of it all.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So what memories do you have growing up?

Danita Coulter:

We had a pretty big family growing up, so that takes me to one of the questions that we talk about, about equity, and what makes me think about what drove me to focus on equity is the diversity of my family. So the memories that I have growing up is that my mom was the oldest of 12. She comes from a very big family, she was the oldest of that family. So some of the fondest memories that I have is going to Garrard County. Every Sunday, we have these big potlucks, so everyone in the family would bring a covered dish, the adults would just chat for hours, the kids would just play for hours, but at some point, the kids would always spend some time just sitting around listening to the adults talk.

So that is kind of where I started hearing the stories about my family's heritage. That is where I first learned about the term sharecropper. As a young child, I didn't know what being a sharecropper meant and what impact that would have on my family's heritage and future, which leads me to this equity work. But those are some of the memories that I have growing up, is just being able to sit around my mom, my aunts, my uncles, all those elders in our family, and hear about the stories of the great-great-grandmothers, the great uncles, and hear all those stories of the struggles that they had to bring our family together to what they are today.

So they're a very resourceful group of people, and so, I think that that kind of brings me to who I am today.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

What were some of the stories that you were remember really keenly?

Danita Coulter:

Oh, wow. One story that I can really think of that impacted me greatly is that one of our ... Well, I can think of a couple as I'm telling this one. So my great-great-grandmother, one of the stories that's really sad that kind of impacts me is that, of course, she was older and a direct descendant of the slavery, and so, one of the stories that my mom often talked about that made her sad was how some of her children, she did not know where they are because they were taken from her due to that situation.

But we have several people in our family, they go back and they trace our roots, and so, we did find at least one of our great, great, great, I don't know how many greats there were, but just one of them that we were able to track his ... Found his grave, actually. And so, he was a former slave, he has a tombstone that we found that was in Garrard County. So those are some stories that are impactful to me, to my family heritage, that we're able to trace and know our roots and where we're from, and so, it's impactful in a way that it lets me know where I'm grounded and it makes equity important to me.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Oh, absolutely, yeah. And sometimes folks don't understand that the stories come down the generations, and when we talk about things like slavery, the memories are still there in our families. And how incredible for your families to pass down what had to be the trauma and the resilience.

Danita Coulter:

And those are the two important terms that I think are important when we talk about the equity work, is the trauma, but also, the resilience. So I think that that is crucial when we do the work that we're doing today, that we be resilient, but we also keep the stories alive, but we don't necessarily have to stay rooted in living those stories. But it's important that we know that they exist.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Right, because some of those stories are stories of incredible strength.

Danita Coulter:

Yes, absolutely, and I look at my mom as one of those stories of strength. She's like my rock, so when I'm having a bad day, I absolutely give her a phone call, and she absolutely cheers me on.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's fantastic. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Danita Coulter:

So I have one older sister, and I had a younger brother, he's no longer with us, but we have his children, so his legacy still lives on. So it was just the three of us, she came from a big family, but she only had three children. So one of the stories that she always talks about, is from the big family, is that they always fought over the last pork chops. So I guess she didn't want that to happen anymore.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

All right, all right. So you graduated from Danville High?

Danita Coulter:

Graduated from Danville High, yes. We had Bate Middle School and Danville High, so it's kind of small, the schools that we had.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And then, you decided to leave and go to college?

Danita Coulter:

Yes, Richmond is always so close to Danville, and many of the people that graduated from Danville High School went to Eastern Kentucky, so it was always a place that I visited. And so, it was kind of ... When I think about it, and I only had two options, I thought about going to Tennessee State and EKU. And EKU, it was my ultimate choice, and so, that is where I ended up going, and it was a good choice for me.

So I went immediately out of high school and stayed there for a couple of years, and then I left, came home, and that's when I went another route, had my son, and then started a family. And then, later on, when I decided to go back to school, I went for a paralegal degree and spent some time in that area. But then, I eventually came back, and that's when I decided to go into social work. So eventually went back, and then I finished up online for my master's in social work. So it was a long path to that ultimate degree, but sort of a zigzag path for me to get to there.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And getting there is what's important, and congratulations on getting your master's, that's fantastic.

Danita Coulter:

Thank you.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That really is, I admire that. And you finished up online, so ECU at that point was able to accommodate that?

Danita Coulter:

Yes, they were. Yes, they were. The online courses were great, professors were great, so great mentorship there. I'm still able to reach out to them, even with the work that I'm doing for the branch here, I've been able to communicate with them and get some mentorship there. So I applaud ECU in the work that they do with their social work program.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Were you working while you were getting your degree?

Danita Coulter:

Yeah, I absolutely was.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And the family. All right, all right, we're talking resilience here.

Danita Coulter:

Yes, yes, yes. I had some long days and some long nights.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I bet. How did you balance all of that? How did you balance the family life and the work life and the academic life?

Danita Coulter:

It was hard, but I tell you, I have a little goal book that I keep on my desk, and so, it was one of my goals that I had. I know many times when I talk to people, they will ask you, what are some of the things that you have on your list of things that you want to do? And many times, I had said, one of the things that I have not done is completed my education. And there was this one point that I said to myself, man, I have been saying that for quite a while, so what's really holding me back from checking this off of my little goal list? And so, when it came to balancing that family life and the work life, it was just something that I felt was critical for me at this point. So when I say the long nights and the long days, it was just something that I felt like it had to be a sacrifice for me because it was time.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's really great. I love hearing about your goal book, so somebody asks you, what's next, you've got it written down and you're ready to go.

Danita Coulter:

I have it written down. I have to have my goal book, and I have to have those affirmations. Those are the things that keep me going.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's important. That's really important. So when did you start working for the cabinet? How did you get here?

Danita Coulter:

Okay, so I started working for the cabinet in November of 2022. How did I get here is that ... Well, there's I think sort of a natural segue way for it. I was working for the University of Kentucky through Kentucky Injury Prevention Center, which has-

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

KIPRC, yeah.

Danita Coulter:

... Yes, which has a partnership with the Department for Public Health. And through that relationship, I actually collaborated with Michelle Niehaus on this great project.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I've interviewed Michelle before.

Danita Coulter:

Yeah, and through that project, Michelle and I have ended up becoming great friends. So things happen that are just meant to be, and that's why I said it's just a perfect segue for how I ended up here. And so, working on that project with Michelle, I just continued talking to her and saw this job that came available, and it fit with my social work goals. I kind of talked about my family and the resources, and how they're resourceful. With all the work that I have done in my past, one of my main goals is that I've always been a person that advocated for individuals to help them get their resources, and I've always been one that focused on people advocating for their health.

Because you hear, it's a cliché, but it's really true. Health is wealth. So when you educate an individual about being able to find resources to help improve their health, it ultimately helps them improve their overall situation. So once someone's able to find out ways to find better education, find resources to bring food into their homes, find ways to help their children, and even help other family members, it kind of clicks in, and it just helps them overall. So when I saw this job description, I was like, this job actually clicks off all of the boxes of what I'm looking for.

So in one of my courses, they were asking us, what's your dream job? So I kind of talked to them about, well, the job that I'm looking for is something that has to be policy-oriented that will help people improve their overall health outcomes. And literally, within a week, I saw this

job advertisement. And so, I interviewed for it, and went back and talked to my colleague at KIPRC, and I'm like, I blew that job interview, I was horrible. I don't think I'm going to get it, so you're stuck with me. And I was really shocked when I got the return call, and so, here I am.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So you didn't do as badly as you thought, obviously. We're all our own worst critics, there's no doubt about that. But your job now is with Medicaid, right?

Danita Coulter:

It is with Medicaid.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And describe it a little bit.

Danita Coulter:

So not one day is the same, that's for sure, and that's what I really love. And so, our goal is to focus on removing those barriers for social determinants of health for the members that are enrolled in the Medicaid program. So we work closely with the managed care organizations, we work with our technical advisory committees or any other community partners that might reach out to us, that say, hey, we're interested in a specific population, what is Medicaid doing for this population? So we may reach out to the managed care organizations and say, hey, can you tell us, what are you doing for this population?

So we will analyze this information that they have, we'll compare what other states are doing, and then, we look and see, is it feasible for Kentucky to implement something like this, and is there any policy changes that we may be able to do? Is there something that we can look at our contracts that we might be able to improve in the future? We try to work across the cabinet to try to streamline with our sister agencies to see how we can collaboratively work together to improve all the programs, with the ultimate goal of improving health outcomes, and seeing if we can ultimately improve policy. That's our goal.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, yeah. Well, and we work on equity and resilience in CHFS. How have you participated in those initiatives?

Danita Coulter:

So working with the Racial Equity Core Team is one of our great focuses, and so, we have the monthly meetings with our Racial Equity Core Team. So each branch or division is empowered to think outside the box about how you want to bring this equity message back to the cabinet so they can come up with something within their branch, and then, they can share that program out to us monthly, or they can invite a speaker in, have a program in. And so, they bring those to us each month.

We like to find any type of education that we can bring. If it's a video, we share those things, and then, we come back and we say, tell us how you felt about that, and what are your thoughts on that? We're also trying to work together to come up with some curriculum that we want to implement, and have that vetted through and shared across the cabinet. That is something that, when new employees come in, that they understand about equity, that it's shared, and that it's not just a one-time thing, that we talk about the cores, the values, and the beliefs of the employees across the cabinet, and how we can better understand each other and those people that we serve, as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Right, and I think particularly coming from your position in Medicaid, Medicaid, we're serving 1.5, 1.6 million Kentuckians, like a quarter to a third of all Kentuckians, and I think it's so important to be able to lead from particularly around equity and health equity, and you being a part of Medicaid, I think is really exciting.

Danita Coulter:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And I don't think folks understand how much we in Kentucky, in many ways, are leading across the country.

Danita Coulter:

I think people don't know ... When I talk to people about some of the initiatives that we do, and when I look at many of the emails that comes across, I'm like, we're already doing that. We're already thinking about those things. So there are many progressive states that we follow, we look at California, we look at Massachusetts. Those are some of the great states that we like to look at them, even though they're much larger than Kentucky, but some of the ideas that they have, our team is already thinking about how we can implement those ideas within Medicaid here.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, I think what's neat is, from what I've seen and heard, that folks are looking at us, too, trying to figure out what we're doing, and how did you do that?

Danita Coulter:

Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And you've also been selected for the Equity Changemakers Institute, let's talk about that for a second.



Danita Coulter:

I am so excited to be a part of the Changemakers. I associate the Changemakers ... We just went to California, and I was talking about it with our group, as we were walking down the street, we went to this really neat bookstore, it's called The Last Bookstore on Earth or something. It was a really cool bookstore. I found a book of poems there, but I was talking to them about James Baldwin, who is one of my favorites. But I think about the Changemakers with a quote that I also have on my social media pages, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced.

And so, that's what changemakers are, we kind of face those difficult things. And so, being in this group, walking amongst this group of people from New York, Oregon, we've got people from Massachusetts, there were people from California there, and it's just like, everybody's just so excited to be there, and everybody's vision-focused, and everybody wants the same thing. They want equity, they want health equity. It's a group of people that has an opportunity to share their challenges, but also, share their successes, so it's just a great place to learn, to share, and to grow. Not only do you grow individually, but you also get tools to bring back to your organization to help your organization grow, as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's good. So just a little bit more about that institute, who they represent, how that came together from a national perspective.

Danita Coulter:

Right, so The Center for Health Care Strategies, we have been working with them since I came on board. So we work with them through what we call the Medicaid Innovation Collaborative. So with the MIC, they bought on our managed care organizations through this tech-enabled, innovative platform where we talked about all the different ways that tech could help improve Medicaid. Well, they have these strategists that kind of talk to us about ways that we can look at improving Medicaid.

So there's been different cohorts that they had. The first cohort was based on behavioral health, and this one is based on the social determinants of health. So through this social determinants of health, there were over 100 different innovators that they had on board that we were able to look at and choose from to see what would be the best option. So Kentucky was able to come up with a few different options that our MCO plans chose and were able to work with. The Centers for Health Care Strategies, they have several different grant opportunities that they offer, ongoing, so even if Kentucky does not participate in a specific grant opportunity that they have. They have the newsletters that they share, they have blogs, and so, there's always those technical assistance calls that we can participate and continue to learn from their strategist.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, they're national strategy. This federally sponsored ... Federal agency sponsors it, and we get to participate, and here we are with all these other states, and we're representing Kentucky,

Danita Coulter:

And they really like Kentucky. So I mean, it's really not something small, really, I mean, they have really enjoyed their relationship with Kentucky. They've talked about that with me specifically, multiple times, so they've been impressed with us, and we want to keep that momentum going with them. So it makes me very excited that they're focused on Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, and impressed with you. So relate that back to your family, relate that back to the stories you were hearing in Garrard County on Sundays, and really bringing that forward to this national group.

Danita Coulter:

So it actually made my mom cry. My mom, she's very proud of me, and I think that in my wildest dreams ... We grew up very humble. I grew up poor, I mean, I can say that as a child, my family struggled, my mom and dad struggled. They struggled from being poor to at least getting us to middle class at some point. So when you talk about resilience, I can remember us going through those different stages. So for me, I don't think this is something I would've ever envisioned that I would have completed an application and been selected to represent Kentucky at a national level. When I talk about the potential for me to grow as an individual, and to be able to bring that back to my state, that's huge for me. And when I first got the news, I was very overwhelmed, and I think I still go through that same feeling in different stages. So it's something that I appreciate greatly, and I don't take it lightly. It's a big responsibility for me.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, and from your own story of finding a grave of a forebearer, and now representing this state where he is buried across the nation.

Danita Coulter:

Yeah, it is something that, when my grandchildren are old enough to understand, I would like for them to be able to grasp the impact of that story.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Because it's a powerful story. We have so many powerful stories around this cabinet of folks who are in leadership positions, or here, who have benefited from our programs, and who've lived through some of that. And I think that's some of the power of who we are.

Danita Coulter:

Yes, absolutely. I think, like you said, some of the stories, I think if you think about them individually and you're in your own silo, it does not seem as impactful and as amazing as it is until you share that story with someone else and it comes back to your ears. You're like, wow, that really is amazing, it's amazing things that we're doing.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Sometimes we don't give ourselves the grace or space to how we tell our own stories to ourselves. And like I say, I just think there's a power in that, and an example and a beauty that we don't often get to experience. And sometimes it's stuff like this that we get to pull that out, right?

Danita Coulter:

Yes, yes, yes. Because I don't think, outside of this podcast, I would've ever told this story, so I think it probably would've just stayed within my family.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And now it's shared, and folks can understand what we all live through and go through, and our families. And we bring a lot of pieces to this work, but we also bring where we come from, too.

Danita Coulter:

Yes, and I think that makes it important when you talk about when you deal with those people that we are serving, so that makes the equity piece more impactful. So when you're serving someone, you don't know their story. You know what's happening at that moment, but you truly don't know their whole story, so it's easy to misunderstand someone when you don't know their entire story.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Right, right. I'm going to move us on to, I say this is a fun part, but we've already been through a fun part. So how do you feed you? What are the things you do outside of work that feeds your spirit, that feeds you, across your life?

Danita Coulter:

Oh my gosh, I have four grandchildren ...

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Oh, congratulations.

Danita Coulter:

... that are everything. So they are 12, 9, 8, and 4, which is a range of, I'm almost a teenager, to, I don't know if I want to be a baby or if I want to be grown. So they are my inspiration, number one. But they keep me very busy, so when I'm not working, I always like to try to spend fun

time with them whenever I can. My family is something that's very important to me, so whenever I have a free moment, if I'm not here on my downtime, because I do have my straight time when I like to just vegetate out. I like to watch those drama series that are true stories, so if I can find one of those, I'll watch one of those. True story mysteries, solve that mystery, I like those. Outside of that, it's going to be my grandkids. They keep me young, keep me moving, and they are entertainment. So two boys, two girls, and that's my joy.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Oh, that is a great joy. That is a great joy, and you get to watch a wide range grow up-

Danita Coulter:

I do, yeah.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

... and go through different stages. That's very nice. Well, thank you for talking to me today, I really enjoyed our conversation. I hope we get to have more. And I appreciate all the work you're doing because it is very important work, and your story's inspiring, and we need to keep all that together because that's how we keep moving forward.

Danita Coulter:

Thank you so much, I have enjoyed speaking to you, as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

All right, and I hope those who listen will tune in again and join us again.

Julianne Hatton:

Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, produced by Julianne Hatton. Our assistant producer is Brice Mitchell, with help from Jennifer Hubbard. Find us at [chfs.ky.gov](http://chfs.ky.gov), and tell all your friends about the show. Until next time, stay healthy, Kentucky.