

## Fairness and Regional Equity are Essential for Community Wellness

---

10.02.19

Perhaps what is most important to all of us is good health. Our physical, emotional, and spiritual wellness impacts everything we do—from our ability to focus at school or work, to connect with family and neighbors, and to contribute to the success of the community at large. If we are not healthy as a community, everything, especially job creation, productivity, and economic growth, becomes so much more difficult.

At present, New Bedford has work to do towards improving public health. As a community we struggle disproportionately with obesity, smoking, hypertension, mental health, diabetes, substance use, inactivity, and frequent poor physical and mental health. Much of our population lacks access to dental care, our seniors rarely receive preventive care, and many patients end up in the emergency room.

To create systematic change in the health of our community we need strong local institutions with top-rated professionals, facilities, and programs in place. Southcoast Health is just such an institution and St. Luke's Hospital has been a cornerstone of our city for generations. We were proud to read this summer that US News and World Report ranked Southcoast Hospitals number eight in its list of Best Regional Hospitals in Massachusetts. Such recognition validates the professionalism of the staff and the significant investments that Southcoast Health has made to deliver high-quality clinical services here in our region. They offer advanced clinical care that rivals the best institutions in this state and have continuously reinvested meaningful resources right here in New Bedford.

We understand that since May, Southcoast Health has been actively engaged in negotiations with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (BCBSMA) in hopes of agreeing on terms for a new contract effective January 1, 2020. These negotiations are happening at a time when the cost of healthcare is a national conversation, often set in a divisive political context. However, that debate only serves as distraction since this specific issue is about regional fairness for our citizens. We feel strongly that these negotiations reach a resolution that allows our local hospitals, physicians, and citizen patients to be treated fairly and equitably. For far too long, this has not been the case in our region.

Many individuals and families in New Bedford are covered by BCBSMA and have expressed concerns about their decision to potentially terminate the contract with Southcoast Health should negotiations for a fair rate not be resolved. If this occurs, many local employers will be forced to send their employees out of the region for care—hardly a realistic option for many in New Bedford. And make no mistake about it; traveling out of the region for care will cost these families far more out of pocket than modest adjustment to their premiums if a resolution on fair reimbursement cannot be found. We value the investments that Southcoast Health has made to ensure that residents of New Bedford and the neighboring towns can get quality care in their own communities. For many of them, switching to a different healthcare system will not just mean additional cost and unnecessary inconvenience, but sacrificing long-standing, valued relationships with their clinical providers.

As a group of community leaders whose priority is to promote sustainable and transformative economic development, we have become accustomed to competing with Boston for top talent and resources, but we refuse to accept the notion that we must also compete for access to high-quality healthcare. With the continued growth of our region's economy, we need a healthcare system that can grow along with us. We stated as much in our 2018 policy report, *Realizing the Potential: A City of Innovation, Collaborative Leadership, and Creativity*.

Southcoast Health has stepped up to the challenge, and now we need insurance providers such as BCBSMA to join them in investing in the health of our city and region. The facts show that this is not about Southcoast Health simply wanting more money, and we are asking that BCBSMA rethink its decision to prioritize the hospitals of other regions over those on the South Coast. To this end, we sincerely hope that BCBSMA will find common ground with Southcoast Health on the equitable and fair reimbursement rates that our region deserves.

We are writing on behalf of The Regeneration Project of the New Bedford Economic Development Council—a collaborative platform that represents community, institutional, and business leaders who are committed to shaping, advocating for, and tangibly advancing strategies for sustainable and shared growth for the City of New Bedford and the region.

**Maureen Sylvia Armstrong, Co-Chair**

President, CEO and owner  
Sylvia Group Insurance

**Cheryl Bartlett**

CEO  
Greater New Bedford Community Health Center

**Rick Kidder**

President & CEO  
SouthCoast Chamber of Commerce

**Dr. Robert Johnson**

Chancellor  
University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth

**David Slutz**

Managing Director  
Potentia Holdings

**Helena DaSilva Hughes**

Executive Director  
Immigrants' Assistance Center

**Amanda McMullen**

President & CEO  
New Bedford Whaling Museum

**Paul Chasse**

CEO  
Realtor Association of Southeastern MA

**Jennifer Downing**

Executive Director  
Leadership SouthCoast

**Anthony Sapienza, Co-Chair**

President  
New Bedford Economic Dev. Council

**Anne Broholm**

CEO  
AHEAD, LLC

**Peter Muise**

President and CEO  
First Citizens Federal Credit Union

**Dr. Laura Douglas**

President  
Bristol Community College

**Elizabeth Isherwood**

Chairman  
Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation

**Christopher Rezendes**

Founder and President  
INEX Advisors

**Doug Glassman**

Owner  
SERVPRO of New Bedford/Dartmouth

**Jeff Glassman**

President  
Darnit! Inc.

**Richard Canastra**

Owner  
Whaling City Display Auction

**Joseph Nauman**

Executive Vice President, Corporate and Legal (retired)  
Acushnet Company

**Rosemary Gill**

Executive Director  
Zeiterion Performing Arts Center

**Adam Cove**

CEO  
Edson International

**John Vasconcellos**

President  
Community Foundation of SE MA

**Maria Rosario**

Executive Director  
NorthStar Learning Centers

**Sarah Athanas**

Co-Founder  
Groundwork