

Dear Lou,

I came to you to lead Missouri Foundation for Health, where we work with others to achieve health equity across Missouri. That encompasses everything from reducing childhood obesity and firearm violence to pushing Medicaid expansion, focusing on infant vitality and women's health, and more.

I grew up in Washington, D.C. in the 1960's and 70's, where I was exposed to social justice movements and racial strife. I came from a family of nurses, police officers, ministers ... people who live lives of service. I knew I would too. I have worked at nonprofit organizations for almost three decades.

Before I became a St. Louisan, I worked with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in New Jersey, which spans the entire country. Here, what we do is just as important, and just as complicated. For so long, equality has been the great American ideal—and it has taken us far. But as we know, especially in my line of work, health equity is really our opportunity to go even further. To create a greater ideal.

Saint Louis first drew me as the place that ignited calls for justice, dignity, and equity across the globe after Michael Brown's death. I still carry that heartache and awe with me. When I arrived, you charmed me with your rich, deep culture, your art, jazz, and innovative food scene.

I have found strong leadership, interested in upholding the will of the people and working with communities to make their lives better. People who understand that health equity is the path to solving so many other problems, and that racism has no place, especially in the public systems that serve us all. That awareness and accountability—which are not everywhere—are important drivers for the change we all want to see.

I have also found an abundance of kind, curious people here. They ask: Where did you go to high school? What brought you here? Do you have a dog? You really surprised me with your sense of neighborly charity. If one of your own has a problem, their neighbors, their communities, show up. That happens elsewhere too—but here, I see it so frequently. I know that if our systems work better for everyone, that spirit could go so much further, and that's what we're working to do. Remember, Lou—you can love people you don't know.

Traditional visions of health equity teach us to examine issues as opportunities to work with others and help those who need it most, who then get labeled "needy." But they aren't needy. They're strong. They're resilient. They're brilliant, in so many ways.

Is true health equity achievable here? Of course, it is. And it will happen because of the people of Missouri who deserve a fair and just opportunity to live their healthiest lives.

Dear Lou: You bring a tear to my eye.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dwayne Proctor". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Dwayne Proctor
President and CEO, Missouri Foundation for Health