

Pérez preaches advocacy, education, service in championing mental health support



HEJ PHOTO | JOHN STEARNS

Luis Pérez is training Lola, a Sheepadoodle, to be a therapy dog for Mental Health Connecticut, where Pérez is president and CEO.

By John Stearns
jstearns@HartfordBusiness.com

Luis Pérez landed in just the right spot when he became president and CEO of Mental Health Connecticut in 2013.

"This to me was a dream come true," Pérez said of the job at the West Hartford-based nonprofit.

At 56 and likely in the last decade of his career, the position allows him to influence mental health from multiple platforms: advocacy, education and service, three areas Mental Health Connecticut operationalizes in its mission to improve mental health for all Connecticut residents.

"The philosophy here is that you need to have good advocacy at the legislative level and it gave me the opportunity to be able to impact and inform decision-makers across the lifespan" of children, adolescents and adults, Pérez said.

With education, he can help better inform people about mental health,

including tips for healthy people to stay that way, work to prevent stigmatization and discrimination and, through programs like Mental Health First Aid, train businesses and the public how to recognize and respond to mental health warning signs and offer assistance.

Through service, MHC helps guide people to ensure they have the four pillars the nonprofit considers necessary for mental well-being: home; whole health; purpose, such as school, a job, volunteering; and community, including support systems like friends and family.

"Who could argue with any of that stuff?" Pérez said.

MHC staff don't provide therapy, but offer guidance for coping and healthier living for clients experiencing anxiety, major depression, bipolar and schizophrenia, many of whom also have a trauma history. MHC helps across a continuum, from sporadic or daily contact up to 24/7 housing with supervision, with a goal of transitioning clients to as much independence as possible, including helping teachers

Luis Pérez

President and CEO, Mental Health Connecticut, West Hartford.

Highest education: Master's in social work, UConn, 1995.

Executive insights: Your organization is only as good as the person — in our case, the person that's working with the individuals we serve — and they need to be taken care of so that they can take care of others.

and employers communicate effectively with students or workers. Some MHC staff are peers, meaning they've experienced similar conditions.

Clients are referred from the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services. Last fiscal year, 92 percent of MHC's \$13.6 million in revenues were government grants. Pérez calls funding his biggest challenge.

"From a policy perspective, I think we need to recognize that health and human services are essential, not discretionary," he said, adding fiscal policy should follow social policy, but politicians are afraid to have that discussion because of lack of money.

To help diversify its revenue, MHC is launching Mental Health Concierge, the commercial or private pay equivalent of its services, and hopes to reach out to private providers and payers later this year.

MHC also hopes to raise at least \$110,000 this year through its #Be1of110 campaign, where people or organizations raise at least \$1,000 for MHC, founded 110 years ago, and by sharing answers to the question, #WhatMovesYou?

Kim Pita, chair of MHC's board, said the nonprofit is lucky to have Pérez as its leader.

"It was his leadership style and his vision for the organization that really encouraged me to become part of the board," said Pita, founder of Pita Peaces, a brand and marketing consultant.

In a tight fiscal climate, he has shown the foresight to keep the organization stable, she said.

"That is such a critical component of a nonprofit leader," Pita added.

He's demonstrated leadership, too, in the strong team he assembled who believe in MHC's cause, she said.

Emotion in Pérez's voice underscores his feelings for his roughly 250 staff.

"I work for my people, they don't work for me," he said.

Early influence

Pérez seems to channel advice from his late parents, Cubans who left the island in 1960 after the revolution for Puerto Rico, where Pérez was born two years later. The family, including his two older sisters, moved to Connecticut in 1974 when the cigar company for which Pérez's father worked as an executive of Latin American operations, was acquired by a company here.

"My parents were adamant about, 'Get over yourself and look at the people around you,'" he said, noting he and his sisters, who are teachers, landed in helping roles. His mother also insisted the family speak Spanish in their U.S. home, and when dining together each evening.

Maybe that's where Pérez's appreciation for cooking and conversation germinated. He enjoys cooking, is adventurous in the kitchen and exudes a high-spirited laugh.

He and his wife, Jane, better known as "Janie," principal at Chamberlain Elementary School in New Britain, met at The Institute of Living when she was a teacher there at Grace S. Webb School. They will be married 27 years in June.

They met after

Pérez left New York City, where he worked in retail banking in the late-1980s after getting a degree in business and organizational communications. He quit banking in 1989, disenchanted by industry dynamics at the time, returned to Connecticut and landed a substitute teaching job at the Webb School.

He then got a role in a child day treatment program at The Institute of Living, got his master's in social work in 1995, advanced at the Institute and assisted its integration with Hartford Hospital. He then went on to leadership roles with several organizations including as CEO of Connecticut Valley Hospital from 2006 to 2009.

The Institute of Living sparked a career passion, he said.

"It's all about the fit of the individual and their environment and, back to my roots of organizational behavior, it just seemed really tied into each other," Pérez said.



Check out a video clip of Luis Pérez's interview at hartfordbusiness.com.