

Department of Health and Senior Services
Commissioner Nominee Dr. Poonam Alaigh
Senate Judiciary Committee Testimony
State House Annex
March 15, 2010

Good afternoon and thank you, Chairman Scutari, Vice Chairman Girgenti and distinguished members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Thank you for affording me an opportunity to appear before you today.

I want to thank Governor Christie for nominating me to be Commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services. It is truly an honor.

Thank you to all of the members of the committee who took time out of your busy schedules to discuss key issues with me. I look forward to working with you in improving the health and welfare of all New Jersey residents.

I feel fortunate to have had a unique set of life experiences that have positioned me for this opportunity. I would like to spend a few minutes explaining my background and qualifications and then I would be happy to answer your questions.

My life and career have taken me down a non-traditional path that has resulted in defining me as the person I am today. As a daughter of an Asian Indian diplomat, I was fortunate enough to be exposed to four different cultures and school systems while living in four different countries—all before graduating from high school. Whether it was starting school in Zambia, finishing my primary education in New York, entering middle school in India, or graduating high school in Ethiopia, I always found a way to adapt, evolve and enrich. I always found a way to connect with people, with issues and with different perspectives. This is the cornerstone of who I am today, and how I relate to situations.

During those years, a number of people influenced me—but none more than my father. The greatest lesson I learned from him was empathy for others. He often said to me, “It’s only the wearer who knows where the shoe hurts.” Meeting Mother Teresa as a 12-year-old also had a profound influence on my desire to make the world a better place—even if it was one person at a time. These values have guided me in my career.

These early experiences instilled in me a sense of service to others that remains with me today. I have always set aside time to give back—whether as a volunteer for the American Heart Association or working in higher education with the College of New Jersey, or as one of the founders of the South Asian Total Health Initiative—helping to empower this segment of our population.

To be able to give back to the community is the essence of who I am—it inspires me every single day.

Thanks to this diverse, multi-cultural background, from an early age I learned to become flexible in my thinking, in my approach and developed an ability to identify an opportunity in every problem. I learned to understand, appreciate and cherish the differences among people—and to leverage their varying views to reach consensus and create innovative solutions. These are the skills that have served me well both in my professional and personal life.

In addition, my professional background has given me a distinct perspective on the health care system. Yes, I have executive experience in the business of medicine. But my core identity is as a physician, who has continued to practice medicine while seeing healthcare through the eyes of my patients. This has always guided me when I found myself at a crossroads trying to decide what is in the best interests of my patients. This is the defining principle that will guide me if I am confirmed as commissioner.

In working with the staff at the Department, I have found some of the most dedicated, and talented individuals committed to improving the health and well-being of all New Jerseyans.

As we face the current fiscal crisis, my strongest credential is being results oriented throughout my multi-faceted career in health care administration and policy. This training has enabled me to bring various stakeholders and perspectives together and to enact positive changes in the lives of all New Jerseyans. With my leadership at the Department, we will achieve short-term results while keeping focused on long-range goals.

As a Black Belt in Six Sigma, I have been trained to use data and statistical analysis to measure and improve an organization's operational performance. This management strategy has kept me focused on the "voice of the customer" while creating systemic and sustainable improvements in health care. It will enable me to bring a fresh perspective to the challenges facing the state's health care system as well as the senior community.

I know we can do better in New Jersey. We can do better for our most vulnerable—the medically underserved, our seniors, those with chronic illnesses and those at the end of life who need compassionate care. We can provide "patient-centered care" so that we treat the person—not just the disease. We can improve health care to our seniors so they are living in the most appropriate setting, ensuring their independence and dignity.

In these times of limited resources, improved performance and efficiency go hand in hand. We can manage our resources better and use them more efficiently. We can bring greater transparency to government and to health care.

We must evaluate our health care system and look for redundancy and waste. We must shift to a more comprehensive, preventive and chronic care model—using care coordination and health information technology.

We must understand the challenges physicians face in the current environment of practice, so that we can cultivate, attract and retain the best. We must partner with all of

our health care providers to ensure the delivery of the highest quality of care to each and every New Jersey resident.

This opportunity to do better—for my patients, for the State, and for all New Jersey residents—is truly inspiring and humbling.

I am prepared to accept this challenge and work with all of you to generate innovative solutions to improve the health care provided in our great state. I want to thank you for considering my nomination. It is a great honor to be nominated as Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services. I pledge to Governor Christie, the Legislature, and to the residents of the great State of New Jersey that I will work to the best of my ability to protect and improve the public health and welfare of all New Jersey residents.

Every day, it is the stories of my patients that echo in my ears as a reminder that I have a responsibility to improve the system and better serve their needs.

And now I would be happy to take your questions.