

Leader to Watch

Gregory A. Adams, MHA

Linda Burnes Bolton, DrPH, RN, FAAN

Gregory A. Adams is executive vice president and group president for Kaiser Permanente, reporting to the chairman and CEO. He has direct responsibility for all 8 Kaiser Permanente Regions, serving more than 12.3 million members and operating 39 hospitals and 701 medical office facilities. In addition to his group president responsibilities, he serves on the organization's national executive team and executive committee. Adams started his career with Kaiser Permanente in 1999 and has held a number of executive leadership positions within the organization, including president of the Northern California Region. Prior to joining Kaiser Permanente, Adams held several executive roles in the health care industry, providing strategic and operational leadership for hospitals, health systems, and medical groups throughout the country.



LBB: What attracted you to a career in health care?

GAA: I grew up in a small town outside Atlanta. My family was committed to social justice and valuing all

people. My family had friends in health care, and they were always helping others. At a time when there were few opportunities for people in rural Georgia, and especially people of color, we were raised to believe opportunities existed for us to do more and have an



impact on our communities. Nursing was a place for me to begin to make contributions that would benefit my family and "entire" community.

LBB: Why did you choose to pursue the various roles you have held? Tell our readers about your first role.

GAA: I wanted to address the challenging issues facing my community, and I believed nursing would afford me the opportunity to help others. I graduated from nursing school at the age of 18 and went to work in the emergency department at Crawford Long Hospital, now Emory Midtown in Atlanta. It was a period when nurses were expected to show a certain level of deference to physicians, including giving up their seat when a physician entered the room if another one was not available. It was a very different time, but Crawford Long was an amazing organization and I was fortunate to have strong role models—nurses, physicians, and administrators—who challenged the status quo. These leaders worked to empower all care givers. I experienced the power of committed leaders focused on fulfilling the mission of service. It wasn't just about the care we provided in the ED. We understood the importance of examining the issues of social determinants of health. Early on, I realized this larger

context for care, and I understood that as a leader, I could do more.

LBB: Tell us about a challenging period in your career.

GAA: I have thoroughly enjoyed my career. Every challenge has been an opportunity for growth. One of the most challenging periods was one that solidified my views about leadership and management. I accepted a nursing administrator position at a hospital in Texas without having done my homework regarding the facility's financial risk. This was where I learned how to turn around a facility and the importance of disciplined execution.

A major issue we faced was that physicians and staff felt disenfranchised. We had a very diverse staff that had to be brought together, and it was clear that engaging the medical staff was critical to the turnaround. When I was introduced to the chief of medical staff, he refused to shake my hand because I was a person of color. In this environment, I learned a tremendous amount about leadership. It required that I learn how to work through people's professional and personal differences. It required me to develop the ability to articulate a vision for the organization that people, regardless of their differences, could embrace.

It required me as a leader to not only be authentic, sincere, and vulnerable, but also available. It was amazing to see the growth that occurred within our team, most of whom had never experienced an African American leader. It was one of the most rewarding times in my career.

Ultimately, we were a group of people who came together as a team. We owned the experiences we created for both patients and employees, and we owned our growth. We were able to create a space where people could come together to do meaningful and effective work despite our many differences. We created a space for people to grow professionally and as individuals.

LBB: What is special about fulfilling your desire to serve by being a leader at Kaiser Permanente?

GAA: Our mission has always been to provide high quality, affordable health care services and to improve the lives of our members and the communities we serve. We do this through an integrated model that focuses on population health, which is exactly what inspired me to get into health care in the first place. Prevention is in our DNA. In the last 10 years, we have focused on the transformation of care delivery and using data to drive health outcomes. We generate so much information in the provision of care, and we use that information to identify meaningful opportunities for improvement. It's a continuous quality improvement cycle.

LBB: What can you tell us about Kaiser Permanente's commitment to making health care more affordable?

GAA: We drive affordability through the lens of quality. We believe that if you deliver the right care at the right time in the right setting you strengthen both quality and affordability. We believe every patient and member deserves the best care we have to offer, no matter where we serve them, so we continually work to reduce unwarranted variation in the care we provide across Kaiser Permanente. This includes a dedication to equitable care across specific populations and geographic areas. I think that every person—our doctors, nurses, pharmacists, housekeepers, administrators, sales people, and IT technicians—believes in the mission of Kaiser Permanente. We want to make sure that we are showing up for our members and patients across the country as 1 system, leveraging our integrated care model to continuously improve health outcomes and affordability.

LBB: What do you see as the keys to innovating care in today's marketplace?

GAA: Health care is changing rapidly. Technology is creating opportunities for real disruption. We



Name:
Gregory A. Adams

Hometown:
Carrollton, Georgia

Current job:
Executive vice president, group president for Kaiser Permanente

Education:
Associate degree in nursing from Floyd College, Rome, Georgia, bachelor's degree from Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, and a master's degree in nursing administration from Wichita State University, Kansas

First job in nursing:
Emergency department nurse at Crawford Long Hospital, now Emory Midtown in Atlanta

Being in a leadership position gives me the opportunity to:
Provide a clinical and operational voice and perspective into the financing and delivery of care and services to our 12.3 million members and to our commitment and effort to improve the health of the communities we serve, which include 66 million people

Most people don't know that I:
I am an entrepreneur at heart, having run small businesses including a steakhouse outside of Atlanta and my own health care consulting firm.

My best advice to aspiring leaders:
Follow your passion for service and sustain that passion by making sure you pay attention to your authentic self. Own who you are, own your voice and own the role you choose to play in the world.

One thing I want to learn:
Improve my Spanish

One word to describe me:
Direct

must embrace technology and the rapid changes that are occurring within the health care system. For Kaiser Permanente, that means asking ourselves,

how do we innovate in our current model? How do we disrupt ourselves?

We have work underway to address a number of major issues in health care and within our system. We are committed to meeting the needs of consumers, offering the best that we have to offer everywhere we provide care and service. We are looking to make what we call “bold moves” in a number of key areas. One of these is mental health, where we’ve worked hard to decrease stigma. We recently announced that we will partner with cities around social determinants of health. We are excited about opening the Kaiser Permanente School of Medicine that will train future physicians in the integrated care model, working closely with our Permanente Medical Groups and focused on total health and the power of truly collaborative care. In all of this work, and in many other ways, we are seeking to disrupt ourselves and take a fresh look at how we can improve the health of not only the communities we serve, but the nation as a whole.

LBB: How do you work together with nursing to achieve the organization’s mission?

GAA: Nursing is valued as a leader, innovator, and contributor to care across the organization. I wanted nursing to have a stronger voice at the table and Linda Knodel brings that. She is the senior leader for nursing across the system. We remain committed to bringing the voice of nursing forward with greater authority in the board room, at the executive table and across the system.

We have a nursing strategic plan that is aggressive and supported by the entire leadership team. One example is Linda’s ownership and how she is working with our nurse leaders to achieve Magnet® designation across the system. Linda is working with our regional nurse leaders and our regional presidents to lift the standards of nursing practice across the system. We are committed to making Kaiser Permanente the very best it can be. I’m proud of Linda and her many accomplishments achieved to date, and am confident she will continue to be a valued and productive member of our team.

LBB: What are your thoughts about engaging people and helping them find meaning and satisfaction in their work?

GAA: Everything we do is through our people. We must continue to inspire and engage people to achieve our goals and stay true to our mission. It is essential that we use science and evidence to guide our work, but we also must capture both hearts and minds. All leaders need the ability to listen to team member feedback and incorporate recommendations from our team members. We must be genuine in our leadership. It is the collective mission that drives our people to show up every day. Living out the mission of this organization, with integration, partnership and a shared commitment to community, is essential if we are to achieve the organizational goals. Our effectiveness must be measured by our ability to bring everyone on board. It is our people collectively who make it happen.

LBB: Any other advice for nurse leaders?

GAA: Follow your passion for service and sustain that passion by making sure you pay attention to your personal life. I have a wonderful son who just got engaged. I am fortunate to have great family, friends, and colleagues. It’s also important to make sure you spend time leading outside your organization. I’m on the board for the L.A. Philharmonic, and I get a lot of enjoyment from that. Music supports health and wellness. When I look at my life, I feel fortunate to be passionate about health care. It has been the foundation of much of my life. It is in my DNA to help produce a healthier nation. I’m committed to decreasing adverse experiences that impact health. My advice to nurse leaders is to own who you are, own your voice and the role you can play in delivering high quality, affordable care because you can make a profound difference in transforming health care and in the world.

LBB: Thank you Greg!

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