

[Executive Women]

Solid Foundation

In 2001, a Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Florida team studying the company's philanthropic future came up with the idea of forming a foundation to direct giving. Then-CEO Michael Cascone Jr. didn't have to look far for the new foundation's first executive director. He chose the team's leader, Susan Towler.

Towler, 43, Blue Cross Blue Shield's vice president for community affairs, says the foundation, with its \$53-million endowment, has awarded \$6 million to non-profit community clinics through more than 120 grants, touching the lives of 400,000 uninsured.

A Jacksonville native and University of Florida public relations graduate, Towler worked in PR for corporations in Jacksonville and as a consultant and at a PR firm before becoming Blue Cross' public relations director in 1996. She serves on the Governor's Commission on Community Service.

As Blue Cross community affairs vice president and foundation executive director, she has a significant say in what new health-related initiatives get funded in Florida. But giving away money for a living also means saying no a lot.

"It's harder than people assume it is because you want your dollars to have the greatest impact," she says. "You never have enough resources. We do have to say no, but we listen. That's probably one of the skills I've learned best in this role."

“You want to be focused in your giving, yet there are so many needs in the state.”



Susan Towler

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida, Vice president, community affairs
The Blue Foundation for a Healthy Florida, executive director, Jacksonville

Family: Husband, Jim, is director of donor services for St. Vincent's HealthCare Foundation. They have a 6-year-old daughter, Emma.

Found out: She's an 11th generation Floridian. Her earliest ancestor was one of the Minorcan colonists in the 1700s.

Recently reading:

"Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present" — for a diversity book club in the company's public affairs department. "It's troubling. It's disturbing, but it's necessary reading."

PR was mom's idea:

"I wanted to be, believe it or not, an accountant. Everyone would laugh at that. My husband especially would laugh. 'You? Manage money?'"

Kelly LaDuke

