

WELLNESS CHAMPION

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JAIME LONGORIA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
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It takes a certain kind of person to oversee a department such as the Community Service Agency – a person with a big heart.

Jaime Longoria has been the office's executive director for the last nine years, assisting low-income households and vulnerable individuals in making their lives a little less stressful.

Longoria mentioned as the head of a department servicing members of the public who are going through hardships, he needs to make sure his employees are also taking care of themselves.

“While work is important – we work because of our family, we work because we want to take care of ourselves – it's important for people to embrace wellness,” Longoria said. “The whole idea is that employees can't be helpful to the clients if they – themselves – don't feel well if they don't feel good about themselves, or if they're struggling with something.”

At 60 years old, Longoria admits he has fallen back on focusing on his health occasionally. Currently, to address his A1C levels, he makes more of an effort to move.



“If [my wife and I] go out to the movies or we go out to eat or something, then we go to a store. I'll mention to my wife, ‘You know what? I'll just walk from here to the store.’ Generally, it's from one corner to the other. I did that the other day,” he said.

Longoria laughs that his wife may not like the idea of walking, especially on a hot day, but that she understands that health is important to him and that they both should make it a way of life.

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“Even if it's a shopping trip, we can still incorporate a little bit of wellness. After we eat, it's a good idea to walk. It's just what we have to do,” he added.

Longoria's personal story might be similar to many others around his age. He recalled being physically active growing up – playing sports and always moving,

doing yard work.

However, he revealed that he has struggled with high blood pressure since he was 18 years old, and has been on medication since. Doctor visits throughout his life, even at a young age, were common, so he has always paid attention to his health.

"It's the idea of mortality. Your mortality starts to sink in, so you become a little more conscious. A doctor can help you with that – to become more conscious," Longoria explained.

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That awareness of mortality developed when Longoria's life took a tragic turn 13 years ago when his 6-year-old son died of a critical heart condition.

"He was born with a bad heart," Longoria said. "He went through a lot of medical issues. He was hospitalized 72 times in six years."

Longoria says his son was treated in six different hospitals in McAllen, Corpus Christi, Houston, Dallas, Chicago, and Nebraska. All that time on the road was also hindering Longoria's health physically and mentally.

He recounted developing poor eating habits, always eating from a bag, whether it was while driving or from a vending machine in a waiting lobby. He remembers not getting much sleep and

feeling constant stress as well.

However, even following his son's untimely passing, Longoria says, "I'd do it again in a heartbeat for him, but post that, I was diagnosed as being diabetic."

Since then, Longoria has had his ups and downs with his health. He is happy to report he has recently made a lot of progress.

"I lost a bunch of weight recently," he disclosed. "That was through medication, through doctor's guidance. Also, Kristina [Schmidt] and the Wellness Program helped me make some small changes."

Along with consulting with his doctor, Longoria made appointments with Schmidt, the county's registered dietitian with the Hidalgo County Employee Wellness Program. Through the nutrition consultations that are free for county employees, he says he learned that egg whites, spinach, and tomato can be fun and tasty for breakfast.

At the office, Longoria was always a big proponent of health and wellness by influencing his employees to move during their breaks.

"There's a field right behind the office. Sometimes employees will see me out there walking and I've seen employees are doing that now," he said.

A wellness initiative that developed at the office has recently stirred up some enthusiasm among his staff.

"Our IT guy knows how to dance salsa," he exclaimed. "The class originally

started for a group of folks who wanted to move during their break. I let them use the conference room and they run a video. Then, Carlos [the IT guy] walked by one day and said 'I can teach you to do salsa.' They love that. Turned out to be really cool."

He added that he tries to jump into the line when he can. Longoria believes movement helps his staff's mental health.

"People have to feel good mentally to be in the right frame of mind. Depression leads to people neglecting themselves, neglecting their health. I've been there," he affirmed. "You can improve mental health by walking. You can improve mental health by good nutrition. Then you start to feel good about yourself and then you're able to pull yourself out of what's going on."

Longoria's mindset and attitude have developed and adjusted throughout his life. Notably, after the pandemic restrictions were lifted. He had an evolved motivation and gratitude for service to the community and his family.

"Providing something of value to people who we serve," Longoria shared. "That's exciting for me. Secondly, doing something for my family."

Longoria strongly suggests people look to meld ways to address physical and mental health.

"Keep your mind happy. Whether it's looking out for people to talk to, whether it's visiting with a counselor, whether it's doing things that keep your mental health in the right place," he said. "Also, trying to find a way to balance that with healthy choices and a healthy lifestyle."

