

Compliance Today – August 2021 Meet Saratu Gharthey: Helping New York City be compliant

Saratu Gharthey, JD, BA, CCEP, First Deputy Commissioner for New York City's Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services, New York City, NY

This interview with **Saratu Gharthey** was conducted in the spring by SCCE & HCCA Past President **Lori Strauss** (lori.strauss@stonybrookmedicine.edu), Assistant Vice President Hospital Affairs, Chief Compliance Officer, Stony Brook Medicine, Stony Brook, NY.

LS: Thank you, Saratu, for your time to be interviewed for *Compliance Today*. Let me start by congratulating you on your promotion this past November to New York City's Human Resources Administration first deputy commissioner after serving as the agency's chief program accountability officer the prior six years. Can you start by telling us a little about yourself and the agency you work for?

SG: I am a lawyer turned government administrator. My career has progressed from a large corporate law firm to a senior position in local government—a path I did not at all plan! I am currently serving as first deputy commissioner for the New York City (NYC) Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services (HRA/DSS), the largest city social services agency in the nation.^[1] HRA/DSS has a mission to fight poverty and income inequality. It serves more than three million New Yorkers through 12 major public assistance programs, including healthcare (Medicaid); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps); cash assistance; HIV/AIDS assistance; adult protective services; domestic violence shelters; rental assistance; and child support services. HRA employs more than 10,000 staff and has an operating budget of \$9.6 billion. HRA is a source of critical relief for low-income New Yorkers, particularly in these difficult times.

LS: What did you do prior to joining NYC HRA, and how did this help prepare you for what you do today?

SG: After finishing Harvard Law School, I worked as an associate in a white-shoe law firm for five years. There I represented corporate clients in a variety of complex litigation matters, including business disputes, securities and accounting fraud, and white-collar crime. My work for regulated clients, mostly financial firms and pharmaceuticals, gave me my first peek into government regulation of industries.

In 2010 I found myself on the other side of the fence when I joined the New York State's Office of the Medicaid Inspector General (OMIG) as an assistant Medicaid inspector general. The OMIG's mission is to create a robust Medicaid enforcement program through audits, investigations, and a compliance program. As a senior manager, I oversaw efforts to identify and prevent fraud, waste, and abuse. I quickly came to appreciate the complexities of regulating a large system of healthcare providers; New York's Medicaid program at the time was over \$50 billion annually (it is now \$80 billion)! The OMIG role introduced me to the world of program integrity and compliance, and I found I enjoyed thinking through policy matters. My position also managed a unit of fraud investigators, and I was able to gain operational experience that has served me well.

LS: What about NYC HRA intrigued or inspired you to work for it?

SG: In 2012 I moved to HRA/DSS to create a Data Analytics shop. A former OMIG colleague was managing HRA's integrity arm at the time, and he was excited about making better use of the vast data within the agency and the city at large. My task was to set up a team that would develop new data mining capabilities to proactively identify

fraud and overpayments, create new initiatives, establish meaningful referral filters, and, ultimately, improve investigative outcomes. We were also interested in using data to streamline application processes, particularly client verifications. Public assistance applicants prove eligibility via numerous documents; we believed we could use third-party data that verified the same criteria seamlessly and often more accurately. This had the added benefit of minimizing the client burden.

I have found working in the public sector is personally very satisfying. I really believe in the programs we are administering and take seriously their effective administration, and this gives purpose to my days. Additionally, the City of New York is a great employer in many ways: the environment is fast paced and challenging, the people and clients are diverse, and the career paths are wide open.

LS: Tell us more about your areas of responsibility as the first deputy commissioner and your team and how they support you in your role.

SG: As HRA's first deputy commissioner, I have direct responsibility for four programs: the Office of Child Support Services; Customized Assistance Services (medical, mental health, and substance abuse services); Fair Fares (a discount MetroCard program for low-income residents); and Employment Services (program connecting public assistance clients to work opportunities). Additionally, along with HRA Administrator Gary Jenkins, I have broad oversight responsibility for all HRA programs, which provide services and benefits to millions of New Yorkers, operating dozens of locations across the five boroughs and employing more than 10,000 staff.

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