

INNOVATORS Q&A

# Asthenis: a pharmacy with a public health mission

Amid the pandemic, a Providence company is providing health information in a low-income neighborhood

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 28, 2020, 11:28 a.m.



Dr. Eugenio Fernandez Jr., founder of Asthenis pharmacy in Providence. RUE SAKAYAMA PHOTOGRAPHY

*The Boston Globe's weekly Ocean State Innovators column features a Q&A with Rhode Island innovators who are starting new businesses and nonprofits, conducting groundbreaking research, and reshaping the state's economy. Send tips and suggestions to reporter Edward Fitzpatrick at [edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com](mailto:edward.fitzpatrick@globe.com).*

*This week's Ocean State Innovators conversation is with Dr. Eugenio Fernandez Jr., founder of Asthenis pharmacy in Providence.*

**Question: What is Asthenis, when was it formed, and where is it based?**

Formed in July 2018, [Asthenis](#) is a model that combines public health with pharmacy. The name Asthenis is Greek for the word “patient.” In medicine, we refer to people as “the patient.” Many of the issues we face as a nation stem from a focus away from the patient (people) and more toward administration. We believe that if we focus back on the patient, then we can help dig ourselves out of the hole we created.

Asthenis is located in the affordable-housing complex named Wiggin Village, which is next to the low-income neighborhood I grew up in on Hanover Street in the West End of Providence.

**Q: What are some examples of health equity gaps and how does Asthenis address them?**

Where people live – and their ability to access public health guidance and reliable health education – informs their individual health outcomes. The areas surrounding our location at Wiggin Village are low-income and have trouble accessing reliable health information outside of their doctor's office.

During the early stages of the pandemic, the vacuum for such services became more glaring. There was a lot of information available. Some of the information was accurate, while the rest was, at times, too complex to understand.

Asthenis became an accessible entity in the community that helped guide residents about viral transmission and proper social distancing. This was important early on because many of our at-risk community members did not have access to a reliable community resource for COVID-19-related information.

**Q: What distinguishes Asthenis from other pharmacies in Rhode Island?**

We know that patients do not get to spend enough time with their doctors. Yet your doctor's office is a reliable source of health education. For this reason, we decided to create a community resource for reliable health education outside of your doctor's office. We use our pharmacy to fuel our public health mission. We do not have aisles of junk food and unhealthy snacks. Our mission is to help build a health-conscious community by promoting public health guidance and health education.

**Q: What are some of the challenges that Spanish-speaking customers face at pharmacies and how does Asthenis address that barrier?**

Most of us that speak English as a first language have trouble understanding and remembering complex medical terms and treatment plans that we discussed with our doctors. Your doctor wants to spend more time with you, but the length of your medical session is determined by insurance carriers. This usually results in your doctor being rushed into a session to diagnose, create treatment plans, and explain medical prognosis.

Spanish-speaking patients often have to deal with the same challenge, but have an extra language obstacle to deal with when speaking with health providers. Having to deal with a language barrier while trying to understand complex medical vernacular in a rushed session is a two-fold barrier that our Spanish-speaking patients deal with during medical sessions. The Asthenis model helps mitigate this barrier by creating accessibility for health education outside of the doctor's office.

**Q: How did your studies at Harvard University inform your decision to create Asthenis?**

During my graduate studies, many of my physician peers would often detail that they were not allotted enough time to efficiently diagnose medical conditions and explain treatment plans for their patients. The doctor's office is your primary resource for reliable health education. Therefore, I wanted to create an entity for reliable health education outside of the doctor's office for patients who may still have questions or need help further understanding their medical conditions and treatment plans.

**Q: Asthenis is a finalist for the 2020 Cox Business "Get Started Rhode Island" competition, which offers \$50,000 in prizes. What would you do with that prize money, and what do you have planned for the company?**

The [Cox Business](#) funds will help us increase our operational capacity. We realize that the demand for information about your health is a need in many communities

irrespective of socioeconomic status and primary language. The Asthenis model is designed to help those seeking more education about their health. Our goal is to help build a health-conscious community, and the Cox business funds will help us meet the demand for the Asthenis model in other communities.

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