

# TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

## Paving a path to accessible health care: Amie Shei is Massachusetts' Woman of the Year 2025

*Meet Amie Shei: Massachusetts Woman of the Year 2025*

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*Amie Shei is one of USA TODAY's Women of the Year, a recognition of women who have made a significant impact in their communities and across the country. The program launched in [2022](#) as a continuation of [Women of the Century](#), which commemorated the 100th anniversary of women gaining the right to vote. Meet this year's honorees at [womenoftheyear.usatoday.com](https://womenoftheyear.usatoday.com).*

As a shy girl growing up in Lexington with immigrant parents, Amie Shei thought she had it all planned out. With dreams of becoming a doctor, she'd apply for the premed program and sign up for science courses at her small liberal arts college.

She was still a freshman at Amherst College when those dreams began to shift away from a physician's path to a passion in health and human rights.

Shei eventually found her way, following in the footsteps of the late [Dr. Paul Farmer](#), a university professor and chair of the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. Farmer co-founded Partners in Health, an international nonprofit prioritizing the connection between health and human rights to deliver health care services to those in need.

As president and CEO of the [Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts](#), Shei has come to prioritize and emphasize that connection between the overall health of a population and the environment in her leadership.

“When public health initiatives work well, they are invisible,” Shei said, emphasizing government has an important role to play in making clear the connection between environmental and societal factors and their effects on people's health.

Health, Shei said, is often viewed in a silo, adding that it should be viewed holistically, with environment, income and race social determinants of health.

### **Academic focus shifted but Shei was still searching**

“When I was considering a career in medicine, I had a very narrow view of health care, believing that health depended on the care received from doctors,” Shei said. She switched majors, embraced English and toyed with the possibility of a career in law, working at a Boston firm for two years after graduation.

“I enjoyed reading and writing and thought English would be a good foundation,” Shei said. She is still an avid writer, submitting op-ed pieces to local publications.

Farmer's biography offered her a new direction in life. “[Mountains Beyond Mountains](#),” written by Pulitzer Prize winner Tracy Kidder, traces the life of the man who changed the global perception of public health.

So profound was the impact of the book that Shei applied for the master's program at the Harvard School of Public Health with a focus on public policy. She completed field work for her Harvard-based Ph.D. in Brazil, working with the poverty-stricken favela residents in the city of Salvador.

The experience reinforced her conviction that improving health is not just about medical care but also about the environment and community. The makeshift homes, which lacked electricity, running water and sewers, were a hotbed of infectious and parasitic disease, violence, drugs and prostitution.

For her, changing focus from medicine to public policy was a question of reach. Shei is convinced that policy decisions play a significant role in the overall health of a community. And the thought of just treating one patient at a time was not igniting her passion.

“I realized very quickly I had found my people, my passion and my place,” Shei said.

## Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts

Shei joined the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts in 2016 and moved into her role of president and CEO in 2022. Shei and her team distribute millions of dollars every year to local organizations, funding projects designed to address local health outcomes. Created through the sale of Central Massachusetts Health Care Inc. in 1999, a physician-initiated, nonprofit health maintenance organization, the foundation is a philanthropic organization dedicated to improving regional health outcomes.

“I was very lucky to land at an organization that views health care so broadly,” Shei said.

The foundation focuses on projects that affect regional health, such as environmental factors, availability of potable water, food security, nutrition, access to public transportation, educational and job opportunities.

Local organizations apply for funding based on community needs. The foundation has two categories: short term investments to help kick-start projects, and longer-term ones funded over several years.

### Foundation projects

In December 2024, a seed funding proposal was put forth by the [Southeast Asian Coalition of Central Massachusetts](#) to launch a hydroponic mushroom farm in efforts to address food insecurity in the Asian community. The short-term project has since launched and is proving to be self-sustainable.

The mushrooms are then distributed and sold locally, with the majority of the harvest donated to families, local shelters and senior centers.

Shei said projects like these are making a huge impact not just on a local level but can also prompt policy changes to address the factors that influence health conditions. Shei said the foundation is working on several longer-term or Synergy projects including:

- Supports for the [Quaboag Connector](#), a microtransportation, demand-response shuttle service that serves nine communities in the Quaboag Valley, including Ware.
- A well-water testing project, [Private Well Program to Protect Public Health](#), that focuses on contaminants in private and public wells that serve the residents of Central Massachusetts. More than a half-million Massachusetts residents lack municipal water and rely on private well water for drinking.
- [Encompass](#), a program that offers training, resources and supports to those residents who opt to become foster parents and those who find themselves “unexpectedly called upon” in kinship foster situations.

New Synergy projects launched in 2024 included a [mental health program for adolescents](#) at Southbridge High School in collaboration with the [Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise](#) at Clark University and [support for family-based child care](#).

The foundation has a unique approach to its long-term programming, including an evaluation component that kicks in at the onset and continually gauges the impact of a project.

“We ask what the project hopes to achieve,” Shei said, adding once determined, an evaluator monitors the project, collecting data to determine its impact. “Once a project has ended, there’s little one can do to course-correct.”

Outside of the office, Shei, who ran in high school, still laces up her running shoes. Her dedication to the miles ebbs and flows with her workload, but her passion remains. She recently completed the New York City Marathon, running to raise funds for [Every Mother Counts](#), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting maternal health initiatives across the nation and the world.

Married to a U.S. Army veteran, a former Chinnock helicopter pilot who works in occupational health, the couple have a 10-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter. The family lives in a small Middlesex County town with a rescue dog, Mia.

While her children are still too young to understand her impact on community, her son experienced a small taste of her work as a public health advocate.

“My son wanted to write a letter to the Legislature in support of safe drinking water for people,” Shei said. That desire snowballed into a gradewide letter-writing campaign through his school and prompted a visit from Sen. Jamie Eldridge, D-Marlborough.

“His elementary school had PFAS contamination in its water supply and the kids had to bring their own water in bottles and couldn’t use the water fountain,” Shei said, adding the importance of access to clean water was something he could understand. “It had touched his life.”

In August Gov. Maura Healey included \$100,000 in the fiscal 2025 budget to the state Department of Environment Protection to create a study specifically [looking at testing private wells](#) for contaminants such as PFAS.

Calling it “an important first step,” Shei is a strong supporter of legislation that would give the state the authority to regulate private wells.

“Access to safe, clean drinking water should not depend on where one lives in Massachusetts,” she said.