Dr. Linda Howard  
Chicago Chapter National Black Nurses Association

On any given weekday, Linda Howard, RN, BSN, MBA, PhD (Honorary), can be found filling her Ford C Max with milk, food and medical supplies from her well-stocked garage and taking to the streets to help the littlest patients with developmental delays and their families in the state of Illinois.

A native of Chicago, Coleman is the owner of Bottles To Spoons, Inc., which she founded and incorporated in 2004 after her father passed away. The company provides nursing and nutrition services to children from birth to three years of age. These clients’ nutritional health is managed by Bottles To Spoons, Inc. due to being fed via G-Tube and/or vent dependent, diagnosed with failure to thrive, and/or poor weight gain.

“I came up with the name because babies start with bottles, and hopefully, by the time they are three, they can eat with a spoon,” she said. “After the age of three, they are no longer eligible for early intervention.”

Howard sees herself as an advocate for children to ensure they are nutritionally sound to be able to tolerate their recommended therapies advised by the early intervention therapists.

“The hardest part is to see babies and toddlers along with their families struggle to maneuver daily activities of life in a community that has limited resources for them in an at-risk community.”

“One day, I took a little boy a pair of donated, used, non-brand gym shoes. He had no shoes to wear. It was so awesome to see the smile on his face and to see him run around and being so glad to have the shoes.”

Her days are long and have changed considerably since the pandemic, but she still finds them rewarding.
“I often start my day with telehealth visits. My company provides each family with a COVID bag that includes COVID supplies. I have often gone to the homes of my clients and left masks, hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes. I’ve left a COVID bag on the client’s door. My garage is no longer a garage for my cars. It’s a storehouse of much-needed supplies such as infant formula, feeding bags, etc. I almost feel like I’m always begging—not for myself, for my families.”

Her daily journey often takes her into some of the city’s roughest areas, but over the years, she has gained respect and an unspoken understanding with members of the community.

“Most people aren’t comfortable going into the challenging communities. Some of the ‘corner boys’ got used to seeing my car,” she said, referring to the local drug dealers who hang out on street corners. “‘Here come the nurse,’ I’d hear them say. To keep from getting my car booted by the City of Chicago, the corner boys would give head nods, thereafter throwing back her head to demonstrate the unspoken signal of acknowledgment. The lead corner boys would pull their lookout car out of a space so I could use it and my car does not get booted. Once [I’m] done visiting my client, I...get back in my car, make eye contact with the lead corner boy and be on my way.”

Howard believes in taking a holistic approach to caring for her patients. Since they are so young, she can’t attend to their needs without making sure their caregivers are taken care of too. Often this means going above and beyond to make sure the entire family has what they need.

“There are some of my patients were sleeping on the floor. It’s not just the matter of a tube feeding, they have to have a place to live. It’s good to be able to provide nutritional support, but if you don’t have a place to live, receive or prepare the feedings, it can be challenging. This means, it is alright to help families with food, not just for the child but also family food needs/supplies, basic necessities and in some cases, furniture. The pandemic has presented even more challenges.

“I have to be creative to provide the nutritional support my patients need to survive. Not just for them, but for their families. I had to learn how to adapt.”

Howard would make the rounds locally to collect “school food”—one week of food like cereal, milk and pizza, juice per child, which is given from designated schools.
“I also go to churches and other community organizations to get food for my clients and also the homeless that I see on the street and/or homeless camps. I only have one child who’s grown, but I would say I had five kids. I’d take the food home and package it up by sorting it out and breaking it down.”

Once she repackages the food, Howard said she leaves it on the doorsteps of her patients. She often collects enough to help others in the community with food, clothing and medical supplies.

“At a stoplight, I can give people a box of food I keep on the front seat instead of offering change, which they often use for drugs,” she said. “I have all kinds of stuff in my car—tubes, medical supplies, clothes, toys, toilet paper, paper towels, disinfectant. A lot of other therapists look forward to me being a part of the team because I have snacks for them too.”

Her assistance goes far beyond food to helping with other necessities, especially when it comes to obtaining them in a world where activities are hampered by COVID.

“From the furniture bank, you can get seven rooms of furniture for $50 if you pick it up, if you don’t have the resources to pick it up yourself, it would be $200 to deliver curbside. If you wanted them to bring it inside your house it would cost $300. Some furniture was used and some was donated. Families could pick out the furniture via Zoom rather than walking through the building, which they did pre-COVID.”

Because Howard works with arguably the most vulnerable population, she has to take extra care for herself and staff.

“I had to be very cautious how I prepared myself to leave and to come back. It was not unusual for me to dispose of my clothing. I didn’t come straight into my home. I came through the garage and disrobed. I used the ultraviolet light in my home,” she said. “All of my nurses...have COVID bags with disposable scrubs, masks, gloves, ultraviolet light, oximeter, thermometers, and tablets for electronic visit notes.”

She has also made a point of devoting time to self-care.
“Driving in my 350 Z and Luther Vandross playing on the radio allows me to remember my fondest memories with my father—riding in the car to Mississippi with a shoe box of chicken and pound cake,” she said.

As Howard continues to grow her business, she is also looking to one day pass the torch to her daughter, Inverness Howard, a registered nurse who currently resides in Houston.

“She said that she wanted to run my company, but I told her she needed an RN behind her name. She got her BSN even though she had two other degrees,” she said.

“My father told me I had to do three things: feed myself, clothe myself and shelter myself. Some of my families have children who will never be able to do that. That was drummed in my head by my father. My daughter has been able to do the same three life requirements. She is my life’s greatest accomplishment.”