

# ***Michael F. Neidorff, 79, Dies; His Company Was an Obamacare Stalwart***

He transformed a small company into a corporation focused on providing health insurance under government programs. It now insures 25 million people.



Michael F. Neidorff in 2019. Under his direction, the Centene Corporation became a major provider of low-cost health plans. Credit...Steven Ferdman/Getty Images

By [Reed Abelson](#)

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Michael F. Neidorff, who built the Centene Corporation from a small Milwaukee health plan into the nation's largest insurer for the government's Medicaid program and a stalwart of the Obamacare markets, died on April 7 in St. Louis. He was 79.

His family said the cause was an infection.

Mr. Neidorff indicated in December that he would [retire as chief executive](#) in 2022, and he took [a medical leave of absence](#) in February. Centene, which is headquartered in St. Louis, appointed [Sarah London](#), who had been vice chairwoman, as its chief executive in March.

When Mr. Neidorff joined [Centene](#) as chief executive in 1996, the insurer, then known as Coordinated Care, offered a single health plan and had \$40 million in sales. Over the next 25 years, he transformed it into a corporation that focused on providing health insurance under government programs like Medicaid and Medicare. Centene now provides coverage to 25 million people and had \$126 billion in revenues last year. “The company he built provides health care for nearly one in 15 vulnerable Americans,” Ms. London said in a statement.

Under Mr. Neidorff’s leadership, Centene chose to concentrate on government-sponsored insurance through Medicaid for low-income individuals and Medicare for older people and the disabled.

“Michael was very clever from a strategic standpoint,” said Dr. J. Mario Molina, the former chief executive of Molina Healthcare, one of Centene’s main rivals. Early on, he said, Mr. Neidorff recognized that fewer people were likely to be insured through their employer while “the government programs were growing.”

When a new market for insurance was created under the Affordable Care Act — the federal law, known as Obamacare, that helps provide private insurance to people who do not qualify for Medicaid but who are not covered by their employers — Mr. Neidorff positioned Centene as a major provider of low-cost plans. He persevered even after many large insurers lost money and stopped offering coverage.

“He stayed with Obamacare in the exchanges when many of the other companies pulled out,” Ana Gupte, a former Wall Street analyst who now runs her own advisory company, recalled.

“They grew remarkably in Obamacare,” she said. “They took advantage of the fact that other companies were risk averse and exiting.”

the United States would be left without a carrier willing to sell insurance under the Affordable Care Act, Mr. Neidorff agreed to provide coverage in some of those markets, said Jesse Hunter, a former chief strategy officer for Centene, and “there was never any hesitation.”

“We want to help out where we are able to,” Mr. Neidorff told The New York Times in [2017](#).

He was born in 1942 in Altoona, Pa., to A. Harvey Neidorff, a physician, and Shirley Rubin Neidorff, a nurse. He had considered going into medicine but decided instead to major in political science at Trinity University in San Antonio. He later earned a master’s degree from Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pa.

He is survived by his wife, Noémi; his brother, Robert; his sister, Susan Neidorff Reinglass; and his son, Peter. His daughter, Monica Neidorff, died in 2021.

Mr. Neidorff had worked for a unit of UnitedHealthcare when he was recruited to be chief executive of Coordinated Care, the small managed-care company that would become Centene. “It was obvious they needed a complete change,” said Robert Ditmore, a longtime Centene board member who was involved in the company.

Mr. Neidorff expanded aggressively into the Medicaid market, despite concerns about whether it would be a successful venture. “I had questions about Medicaid; is it going to work?” Mr. Ditmore said. But, he added, Mr. Neidorff persuaded him: “It was obviously a big market, so we said let’s go for it.”

Mr. Neidorff took the company public in 2001. In 2016, he acquired a California insurer, Health Net, which offered private plans for another government program, Medicare. When the Affordable Care Act provided an opportunity to sell low-cost private insurance through the state markets set up by the federal government, Mr. Ditmore recalled, Mr. Neidorff was eager to become a major player, despite uncertainty about how insurers should price their policies in the new market. “He kept pushing for it,” Mr. Ditmore said. “He was a bulldog with a bone in his mouth.”

Mr. Neidorff made several key acquisitions to add to Centene’s depth. In 2020 he bought WellCare, a Florida Medicare Advantage insurer. This year the company completed the purchase of Magellan Health, which specialized in providing mental health benefits.

Centene’s stock price had underperformed in recent years, and the company found itself under pressure from an activist investor, Politan Capital Management. In December, the company agreed to change the composition of its board, and Mr. Neidorff announced that he would retire as chief executive in 2022.

He was also active in philanthropy. He was chairman of the National Urban League’s board of trustees and a board member of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, the Opera Theater of Saint Louis and the [Manhattan School of Music](#), among other organizations. Last September, he donated \$25 million to Trinity for the [Michael F. Neidorff School of Business](#).

***Correction:***

***April 19, 2022***

*Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this obituary misidentified the institution where Mr. Neidorff earned a master’s degree. It was Saint Francis University in Loretto, Pa. — not St. Francis College in Brooklyn.*

Reed Abelson covers the business of health care, focusing on health insurance and how financial incentives affect the delivery of medical care. She has been a reporter for The Times since 1995. [@ReedAbelson](#)

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