

Leader Profile



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Lynn Nicholas, FACHE

President / CEO

*Massachusetts Hospital
Association (MHA)*

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New leader unifies voice of Massachusetts hospitals

The issues facing hospitals in Massachusetts are those facing providers all over the United States, according to Lynn Nicholas, FACHE, president and CEO of the Massachusetts Hospital Association (MHA) in Burlington. Hospitals must be paid fairly and promptly for the services they render, improve quality and eliminate administrative waste, thus improving the value they deliver. They also need to reduce geographic and socioeconomic disparity in access to and quality of care.

The MHA, with Nicholas at the helm, is helping its members unite around the opportunities these and other issues represent: benchmarking to accelerate quality improvement; bridging the gap between at-risk community hospitals and expanding systems; addressing the digital divide that separates hospitals that can invest in technology and those without resources; and simplifying the administrative workstream. “Our job is to be the big tent,” she says. “We try to keep all the players in balance and give them the opportunity to contribute to big picture solutions.”

That kind of confidence, command of the issues and spirit of collaboration — along with the proven ability to plan strategically and execute effectively — is precisely why the MHA Board of Trustees named Nicholas its president and CEO after a six-month search in 2007.

“To me, a leader is one who inspires others to do more than they thought they could, to be more productive, more creative and more influential,” Nicholas says. “And I try to motivate my team and our members by example, by listening, communicating clearly and by providing constructive feedback.”

Nicholas credits her parents for priming her with what she believes are basic leadership tools: candor, curiosity, openness and organizational capability. She is well-known for doing her homework and showing up very well-prepared.

“As far back as high school and before, I’ve always been the one who stepped in, who filled the vacuum when things needed to get done,” says Nicholas. “Earlier in my career, when I moved from working as a bench technician into management, I showed what I had to offer by volunteering for task forces and taking advantage of other opportunities. I’ve always done what I believed I needed to do to advance and grow.”

When she was a young hospital executive, there were few female role models and the women who were in leadership roles were not supportive. Most department heads and executive leaders were men and Nicholas found their approaches to be generally very pragmatic. “One of my mentors suggested I needed to play golf to add another dimension to my relationships with other leaders and people of influence. So I played golf.”

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Nicholas has spent little time developing a formal career plan. Her strategy has consistently been to reach up and out, learning from other talented people and working to be the best in every role she takes on. The promotions simply followed. She began her career as a medical technologist and worked her way up to a senior executive position at Morristown Memorial Hospital in New Jersey. She became executive vice president and COO of the New Jersey Hospital Association, then president and CEO of the Louisiana Hospital Association in Baton Rouge. She was CEO of the American Diabetes Association in Alexandria, Virginia for three years before joining the MHA.

The opportunity to make the move from hospital administration to the association world came out of the blue — but at just the right time for Nicholas. After nearly two decades in hospital environments, she was ready for a change. “I welcomed the chance to work on the bigger healthcare picture,” she says. “Hospital association leadership offers a wide and satisfying scope of work. There are more health policy issues, and, in many ways, they are more challenging — and present greater opportunity.”

As it began its search, the MHA board called out the special challenges that its new leader would face, noting that the MHA’s influence in the policy arena had diminished over time. “The voice (of MHA) had become one of many and not the unified voice of authority and credibility,” Nicholas notes. “There was a clear mandate, to ‘take it back.’” Her career-long approach of seeing the opportunity in the challenges and organizing around a plan is helping the MHA to speak once again as one.

“This first year at the MHA has been the single most professionally rewarding of my life,” Nicholas says. “The environment here is rich and intellectually challenging. My senior team is professional, educated and highly competent. They are wonderful managers who work well together; they make me look good. I hope our board and members have benefited from the new perspective I’ve been able to bring from outside Massachusetts and I’ve been enriched by theirs.”

According to Nicholas, the MHA board, membership and staff are pulling together to achieve common goals. “We are moving steadily forward,” she says. “We are exploring paths that may not have been considered before and we’re taking controlled risks. And if they don’t work, we’ll learn from them and move on.”

Witt/Kieffer is proud to have consulted with the Massachusetts Hospital Association on this important executive search assignment.

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