

Agency For Change Podcast : Fiona Libsack Chief Development Officer at Great Plains Health

Announcer

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hi, everyone. This is Lyn Wineman, founder and chief strategist of KidGlov, with another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Right now, we all know that health care workers are on the front lines of caring for patients impacted by the COVID-19 virus.

Today, we're talking with changemaker Fiona Libsack, who is the chief development officer at Great Plains Health. This is an independent health system that serves 38 counties in west-central Nebraska, northern Kansas and northeastern Colorado. We're going to discuss the impact her organization is having in delivering rural health care and the innovative way they are involved in fighting the COVID-19 virus, in addition to hearing about her personal story.

Fiona, how are you today?

Fiona Libsack:

I am great! Thanks for asking and thanks for having me on the show today. It's always an honor to represent my amazing team of health care workers here at Great Plains Health. And so, it's a good opportunity to talk about the wonderful things they're doing.

Lyn Wineman:

You are doing some exciting things, and this podcast has listeners across the country, many who probably haven't been to North Platte, Nebraska. Would you start by sharing more about Great Plains Health?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, sure. As you mentioned, Great Plains Health is an independent regional referral center, and it's in central Nebraska. Our reach covers a geographic area about the size of Pennsylvania, and our system includes a 160-bed hospital, 30 medical clinics and about the same number of medical specialties, serving outreach clinics in 38 counties in mostly Nebraska and Kansas.

We have an award-winning organization in many areas of clinical and performance excellence, which I'm super proud of. And we are blessed to have an amazing culture here at Great Plains Health in North Platte and an amazing health care team. So, that's Great Plains Health in a nutshell.

Lyn Wineman:

That's a great nutshell. Wow! That's a huge geographic area that you cover. And I imagine for many you are their primary solution for all their health care needs. I think it's amazing that you are providing that in such a high quality way.

So, Fiona, I understand Great Plains Health is involved in an interesting test of a COVID-19 drug. Could you tell us more about that?

Fiona Libsack:

Yeah. So, currently Great Plains Health has several research studies going on and many are related to COVID-19, in the areas of psychiatry and pulmonology and infectious disease. Last week, Great Plains Health joined some of the first hospitals in the country to administer a drug called Bamlanivimab, and we call it the “Bam drug.”

Lyn Wineman:

Bam drug sounds good to me.

Fiona Libsack:

Many people in health care are now calling it the Bam drug because even some of our pharmacists can't say it. It's a monoclonal antibody drug that recently received Emergency Use Authorization from the FDA for the treatment of COVID-19.

Obviously, I'm not a physician or a pharmacist because I can hardly even say the word, but what I think is exciting about this is what that drug is doing. It is actually reducing the symptoms of COVID-19 so that somebody may not have to be hospitalized. So we do that through Hy-Vee therapy, and many hospitals have set it up differently. At Great Plains Health we're running those patients through our emergency department, but if we can treat those patients in an outpatient setting—send them home with a pulse oximeter or something like that—then we can free up some of those beds that are in desperate need in rural America.

Fiona Libsack:

We received 72 doses of the drug in our first shipment, and we'll be getting more, but already we're hearing from patients who feel great just after a couple of days.

What's so amazing about this time in health care is how quickly some of our drug manufacturers are moving, and the FDA is moving. I know sometimes that is a laborious process, but just the fact that everybody's committed to getting these patients treated as a team I think is a really positive thing in health care right now.

Lyn Wineman:

That is great! I feel like I need to say thank you to you and the people at Great Plains Health, and honestly all health care workers right now because of the great work you're doing. But we all hear about the need for testing and how the testing is going fast and it reminds us that in order for that testing to work, we need to have regional health care centers and doctors and patients that are on the front end of that. And it's exciting to see that work happening in Nebraska.

Lyn Wineman:

So, we've heard a lot about the health aspects and what the pandemic is doing to the health care system. Fiona, you are a leader in your organization and in your community. I'm curious how has this stretched you personally?

Fiona Libsack:

That's interesting you asked that question. A couple of weeks ago, I was asked by the American College of Healthcare Executives to participate in an article about leadership lessons learned in COVID. And it gave me a chance to pause and truly reflect in the middle of all of this busy-ness on what lessons I am learning as a leader right now. What a gift that was to slow down and really be able to evaluate that. As I look at our response to the pandemic, those first few months were a lot of late nights, early mornings and busy days, and varying disciplines of our leadership team were working together to just ensure we had the swiftest and most effective response possible.

Fiona Libsack:

So, I thought, *What were our priorities then? What were we really focused on?* And it was really safety, staffing and supplies; and testing, communication and education, which is where a lot of my team stepped up. And then just that calm and supportive leadership—keeping everybody focused on what mattered and what we could do right then to deal with the situation in front of us. So, still in the midst of COVID, our Great Plains Health team continues to focus on those five priority areas. I think they were good priority areas from the onset.

Fiona Libsack:

I think the growth edge we'll all walk away with after these unforgettable challenges is a greater understanding of who we are as leaders in crisis, and what skills we bring to the table in the middle of a crisis. As a leader, I've had to communicate more. I've had to remain calm when others weren't. I've had to provide hope when my teams were down, and educate much more frequently to ensure comprehension and engagement of these ever-changing policies and procedures.

Fiona Libsack:

So, while I've had to rely on a lot of leadership skills lately, I think the biggest ones I've had to focus on are agility and resourcefulness—being able to move quickly in a time when you need to move fast. As leaders we're called to pivot as quickly as we can in a crisis, way more rapidly than what we're usually comfortable with, and find new ways to do things and encourage adaptability along the way. Right? And so those two areas are particularly important leadership skills as we move through this COVID crisis.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh yeah! Fiona, since this is a podcast, people can't see me, but I'm vigorously nodding my head up and down to everything you've said: Being calm and hopeful, providing education and communication, providing agility and resourcefulness. I mean, I think speed and resourcefulness are at an all-time peak for leaders. So, I think everything you said there was very astute.

Fiona Libsack:

I look at a couple examples that we've had in our own facility. I lead the telehealth division here at Great Plains Health and have this amazing team that works on telehealth every day. For many years in health care, we had this pushback toward telehealth. Was it right for our consumers? Was it the right way to interact? Was it as effective? And what we found out very quickly was as soon as COVID happened, we had all these physicians at our door saying we need the telehealth. Our consumers were saying that as well. And so, we had skill in onboarding telehealth clinics, but we had never onboarded them that fast.

Fiona Libsack:

And so, in just two weeks we expanded our emergency department telehealth capabilities. We brought hospitalist service up on to telehealth. We added 14 clinics and unduplicated services, all active in telehealth. That was just in the first two weeks! And then after that we've added three more clinics and seven in-hospital telehealth services just to get us through. And that engagement, that uptick and engagement from providers and consumers, has been a pleasure for us because we knew it would work in health care. But this crisis has also led them toward the engagement of it, to be able to see what it can do for us in health care, in providing more access and spreading our physicians even further to see the patients that they need.

Lyn Wineman:

Wow! When you think about the massive geographic area that you cover, I mean, if telehealth is one of the things that sticks with us after the pandemic, which I'm sure that it will, that's going to save people time and give them more access to treatment. It's going to be easier on your physicians and your staff. I could just see so many good things coming out of that.

Fiona Libsack:

Right. Yeah. Right now in our current state, 98 percent of our qualifying medical staff are actively engaged in telehealth. I think that's exciting. Our volumes have quadrupled from their baseline since February 2020. I hope that continues, and I really do believe it will. So that excites me greatly.

The other thing I touched on was resourcefulness in leadership skills, and that's something we've become very adept at in COVID. When I look at what our organization was able to achieve, not unlike a lot of organizations across the nation: when we were short on masks, we figured out how to set up a reprocessing center to use UV lights to repurpose those masks in a safe way. When we struggled to secure face shields shipments, we were working with local schools and colleges for their 3D printers to make our own. And then when hand sanitizer ran low, of course, we were working with local distilleries. Who would have ever thought in health care that we would be working with local liquor distilleries to provide a safe alternative to hand sanitizer? So all good, but it definitely required resourcefulness.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely! And I mean, you're a health care system. You can't just close the doors and say "This is too hard. We're going to stop." I mean, the state, several states, people in several counties, rely on you. And I think that even before the pandemic, I know you had some unique challenges and scenarios, just being a regional medical center in a rural area. Can you speak to what that's like, Fiona?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, we are a hospital that has 30 different medical specialties, and as such we need expertise in all of those 30 medical specialties. So recruitment really becomes a challenge in rural America. If I had to look at what the biggest challenge is facing health care in these markets, it's really recruiting quality professionals, and we've been able to recruit many quality health professionals. So that makes me happy, but it is most certainly a challenge.

We can get the people to come out and take a look. And when they're here, they fall in love with the place, and they especially fall in love with the people. I mean, the people of Nebraska are just amazing, but it's actually getting them out here—getting those medical professionals, the nurses, the physicians, the respiratory therapists, the surgical techs, you name it. We struggle to bring that workforce here.

Fiona Libsack:

So, we've done some creative things. We participate in an international nursing program where we bring people from all over the world here through that program. We offer housing down payment assistance to our teams so that when they come here, they can invest in a home and become more rooted right away by working on some of those down payments. We work with local colleges to set up programs here so that people can get trained in their own homes here in our community, and then stay. There's a lot of creative things that we do that probably don't happen in bigger cities, but they help here because we're not about settling for anything, we want the very best here at Great Plains Health. And so, we're willing to put in the time to recruit that.

Fiona Libsack:

The other thing that we work on pretty consistently is our organizational culture. And that becomes a pretty important factor, making sure that you have an organizational culture that people want to stay with. We've been very much involved in growing our culture and making sure it's a place that people want to work for a very long time. And we're seeing great reduction in our turnover rates and the quality of applicants we're getting. So, while it's a challenge in rural America, I don't think it's an insurmountable challenge.

Lyn Wineman:

You know, I even wonder if that will be a benefit for you because of the pandemic because you keep hearing that people are leaving larger metropolitan areas that are more congested to go to open spaces, more like North Platte. And I think the thing you have going for you in North Platte is that you've got that combination of having a nice city, but also having the wide open spaces. And it's absolutely beautiful there. So, anybody listening who hasn't been should go, because it really is pretty.

Fiona Libsack:

The one thing I will say is I think there's going to be a good shift in the growth of rural America, as more people are being allowed to work from home. And so the employer base will expand for us.

Lyn Wineman:

That's fantastic! So, Fiona, I want to switch and talk about you a little bit, because I have read that you actually have a political science degree. I know that you served as the mayor of Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and I've also read that you were a television station manager. I mean, that's a pretty interesting background. How did you go through all of those different positions and then come to where you are at Great Plains Health?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, I would say my professional journey has definitely been a windy road. But I tell you what, I'm really pleased at the path that it's taken. Yeah, I was managing a television station and loved it. I had an opportunity to help produce and write several TV commercials for a local hospital. These were like single-person interviews—low lighting. They were interviews of the health care professional plus the patient. And I loved it! What I loved about it was that I was so in awe of the professionals that had been able to serve the patients. I felt so privileged to tell that story, because it's such a beautiful story, that health care journey. The story of why people get into health care and the insurmountable tasks that people go through in a health care journey—just to be able to tell that story. I just found it fascinating.

Fiona Libsack:

So not too long after that, I got a call from the hospital's vice president of marketing asking me to apply for an open position. And I am so glad I did so because that was 20 years ago. Or more than 20 years ago now. And since then I've been in three different health systems, both large markets in Colorado and small markets in Nebraska, and moved from a marketing specialist position all the way up to the health care executive position. Every day in health care is just so exciting, full of learning and different. It's just a career that I've never regretted stepping into. And it's really become a passion of mine and a privilege to serve my communities in this way. So, it's just something I've really enjoyed.

Lyn Wineman:

You know, when I talk to people who get to do what they love for an organization, that makes a big difference. Those are some of the happiest people with their careers that I've ever talked to. And it feels to me like you have found that balance for yourself.

Fiona Libsack:

I really have. I've tried to stay focused in my career on doing the best work I can do; making an impact and serving others versus trying to move up the ladder. I just think because of that, things just fell into place. I've just liked where I've been at the time and I've moved up steadily.

And you mentioned the mayor's position. That was an interesting time for me, I have to say. It happened much the same way that my marketing career did. I'd been serving on our local city council, elected to my second term. Several of the city council members asked me to consider a mayor's position. Apparently they just appreciated the leadership and communication style that I had, but it was a good fit. So I jumped in and I was elected, surprisingly.

Fiona Libsack:

At the time I had young children and a full-time marketing career. So I'm not sure what I was thinking becoming a mayor on top of that. How I did it, I'll never know. But I think about that a lot as I watch young mothers balancing their careers and home, and then trying to do everything. And I think, *Wow! I can't believe you did that.*

I had young children, but it felt pretty good to make a difference and to serve my community in that way. And my kids also think it's pretty cool that I was the first and only female mayor of Scottsbluff. So that's something, and I'm really glad my daughters understand that it's a goal that's attainable and they can shoot even higher. So, if that was my purpose in that job, then I'm happy for it.

Lyn Wineman:

That is really wonderful. Sometimes it seems too like a health system is kind of a city in and amongst itself. I mean, there's so many different parts and pieces and things that happen. I'm just curious, are there things that you took from that position as mayor that you apply today in your position at Great Plains Health?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, I firmly believe that good leadership is built on solid relationships, and no matter what level, our relationship is important because everybody brings something to the table—a different perspective, unique insights. In that position as mayor, and even in my career in health care in no matter what area

I've been supervising or leading over, building those relationships become the foundation for everything that we do. And so, I would say there is a corollary.

Fiona Libsack:

When I first took the mayor position, I established a weekly meeting with all the directors. And at first there was pushback—"You're in the weeds and you shouldn't be in the weeds." But I tell you the reason I did it was because it was really important for me to know and understand the directors and what their challenges were. And then constantly asking that question "Why? Why do we do it this way?" or "What is that?" Because I think then we learn where the gaps are. We learn where opportunities are. And so that leadership style has served me well in city government and in health care.

Fiona Libsack:

Just being curious is really important in leadership. I find myself constantly asking the question "Why?" until I completely understand every situation.

There's a great book out there, kind of an old one now, called *Start with Why* by Simon Sinek. And then there was a follow-up book called *Find Your Why*. I love them because they really get to the heart of what's important, and that why becomes critical in building those relationships and in improving just about anything you touch.

Lyn Wineman:

I love Simon Sinek! I'm a big fan of all of his books, and those two in particular. Fiona, we've talked a lot today about leadership and your leadership style and beliefs in leadership. You actually were just recognized by the North Platte Telegraph and NebraskaLand National Bank in the 2020 Women of Achievement in health care. So, first of all congratulations!

Fiona Libsack:

Well, thank you. It's humbling for sure.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that about great leaders. When they're honored, they always like speak about their teams and others. And I love that, but I also love that you won this recognition. So, what was it like to receive that honor? And just tell us a little bit more about it.

Fiona Libsack:

I feel like there's so many amazing women in health care, and even in marketing in general, but I appreciated that I was nominated. I was really glad to accept the award, which I felt was really for all of the women in our organization, because I think they work equally as hard as I do. It was nice to be recognized, but there are a lot of women who also deserve that award.

Lyn Wineman:

That's great. You mentioned you've balanced raising a family with a very demanding and diverse career. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you go back and give 18-year-old Fiona?

Fiona Libsack:

God! Do I even remember 18-year old Fiona?

Lyn Wineman:

I don't know how you could be that far. You do not look like you're that far from 18.

Fiona Libsack:

I just feel like so many things have happened since 18. I think women, especially as they advance in their career, aren't really sure that they deserve to be there sometimes. And that they're either not smart enough or good enough or know enough or they lack experience or whatever it is.

I guess I was a little like that, and I had to overcome and deal with that awful thought demon. And sometimes I did that in unhealthy ways. The more of an imposter I felt, the harder I worked, the more hours I put in and the more projects I took on, the more volunteering I raised my hand for—all at the expense of working out and being healthy and getting enough sleep and eating healthy and maximizing quality time with my family. I actually felt guilty if I wasn't working. And I think that's an interesting place.

Fiona Libsack:

And as I have observed women in the workforce, I feel that happens more for women than it does for men. I could be wrong there. That's not a statistical study by any means, but that's what I have observed. So, it really wasn't until my 40s that I started feeling secure enough in myself and my professional abilities to believe that I was enough—that I was hired into a position for what I had and not what I didn't have, and so being competent in that. So I guess if I could sit in front of 18-year-old Fiona—and any other young professional for that matter—I'd say you're enough. Embrace the learning and the journey and enjoy it. You're enough. Focus on family and self-help first. And then your career second.

Lyn Wineman:

You know, that is great advice. And I'm sure there are people who are listening to this that that is just what they needed to hear.

And once again, we're talking about some of the good things that might come from the pandemic. The fact that we've all ... many of us anyway ... had to slow down a bit and spend more time at home and with family and in self-reflection, and maybe that will be something good that comes out of this.

Fiona Libsack:

I truly have enjoyed that time to slow down a bit. I definitely have.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely! Fiona, I always like talking with marketing people because I'm a marketing person myself. So, I have to ask you one question in this area. What are some of your favorite tips for promoting a diverse organization in the midst of a global pandemic?

Fiona Libsack:

Yes, clearly it is an interesting time in health care marketing. We've seen this seismic shift from promoting our services and growing volume to just educating our public. It's a whole different thing.

I like to tell my marketing team, “Put yourself in place of the stakeholder. What would you want to know right now?” and focus on that, and then ask every one of your stakeholders “What do you need to know right now?” Because right now we have to really be focusing on digestible bites. There's so much static in the market right now—just focus on what's the most important thing.

Fiona Libsack:

As I push my teams and myself in marketing, the other thing I like to focus on ... and my team hates it when I say this, but ... “What else, what else?” When we think we have a good idea in marketing or public relations, play it out. That's a good idea, but what else can we do? What else can we create to make it greater? And what else? Constantly ask yourself, “What else?” And then I'd also say, be curious about everything. If you don't know something, your consumer likely doesn't either. And so, you're the one charged with telling the story as a marketer. Dig deep and make sure you're telling the story the consumer can engage with. Tell the story, don't just give the facts.

Fiona Libsack:

So lastly, I would say be okay that not everything can be promoted right now. Be okay with that. We all have our marketing plans and we're all hanging on. We started 2020 and we had a marketing plan for every service line in our organization. And guess what? It didn't play out that way. Right?

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. Did that just fly out the window about ... March, April, May?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, there's a time and a place for everything. And right now we might just have to set some of our marketing plans aside and focus on what's important, what's the issue at hand—ensuring that our public is safe, ensuring that they're engaged in some of this messaging. And quite frankly, it's not driving volume. We don't need to be filling our hospitals right now. So, it's uncomfortable for marketers because that's where we usually live: driving volume. There's such a bigger role for us to play right now in the success of our community and our organization. Own that role and be comfortable with them.

Lyn Wineman:

That's all really good advice. And I wrote down one thing you said too. “Tell the story, don't just give the facts.” I mean, there's so much research available on how people remember through stories more than they do with facts. And I think that storytelling capability—you probably honed it in your television days and you're such a relationship builder that telling those stories is building the relationship with the audience. I think that's really, really good advice. So, Fiona, I'm going to ask you my favorite question that I always ask in podcasts. I love motivational quotes. Could you give us a few of your own words of wisdom that we could be inspired by?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, I too share your passion for motivational quotes. So, I think right now in this time of COVID, a managing mindset becomes extremely important. I shy away from the word positivity because I think people think that's a little bit Pollyanna. How can you be that positive in this time? But it really is a managing mindset. The other day I was rounding on our communications team and they had this quote posted in their workspace that just stopped me in my tracks because it really made me reflect and think,

Okay, where am I at in this? It read, "When you can control what's happening, challenge yourself to the way you respond. That is where your power is." And I thought, *This team who is short-staffed, they've been pushed to the brim, they're managing their mindset well, and they're posting.* So I just thought what a blessing that is.

Fiona Libsack:

And then one that keeps me in health care marketing is that old Mark Twain quote, "Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life." I really believe that about health care marketing. I have really loved it. And even transitioning into the executive role, it's just such an interesting career every day. It's something new every day, some new challenge every day, it is a job that I enjoy. So that one sticks with me.

And then finally, I tell myself all the time: "Be a builder. Be a builder of relationships, of things, of people—build them up." That's what I try to do in my career. And those are the quotes that I most have affinity to right now.

Lyn Wineman:

I think those are all wonderful and I'm writing them all down. I love the idea of being a builder, because it's so easy. The easiest thing you can do is tear things down, right? But the better challenge is to be a builder. It's fantastic. So, Fiona, how can our listeners who want to find out more about Great Plains Health find you?

Fiona Libsack:

Well, Great Plains Health is truly a great organization. They can find us on the website at gphealth.org or on any of the social media channels: Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram. So look us up.

Lyn Wineman:

Fantastic! And as we wrap up our time together today, what is the one most important thing you would like people to remember about the work you're doing?

Fiona Libsack:

I work with some amazing people in health care, and they're working hard for us right now, so they're working hard for you. So wear your mask, avoid large gatherings and keep your social distance. It's going to take all of us to get through this, and everyone plays a role. If you want to help health care workers right now, just do those things.

Lyn Wineman:

Great, great advice. Fiona, it was a pleasure talking with you today, and I know people will find your story and your words of wisdom positive and inspiring. Thank you so much for your time.

Fiona Libsack:

Thanks, Lyn. Have a great day.

Announcer

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