

Agency for Change Podcast: Aileen Brady, Chief Operating Officer, Community Alliance

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Aileen Brady:

With hope comes recovery and health.

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

Lisa Bowen:

Hello, everyone. This is Lisa Bowen, vice president, managing director at KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Today, we're talking to Aileen Brady, chief operating officer of a wonderful organization called Community Alliance. They're a nonprofit that provides support and resources for individuals living with mental illness here in the Omaha, Nebraska area. I'm excited to talk with Aileen to learn more about their mission, program, and the great impact they're making in our community and the world. Aileen, we're so glad to have you here today.

Aileen Brady:

Well, thank you so much, Lisa. I'm just so happy to be here.

Lisa Bowen:

Awesome. Aileen, would you mind taking a minute to tell us a little bit more about Community Alliance and the great work you do, just high level for those of us that aren't aware of your great work?

Aileen Brady:

So first of all, just to start with, mission really makes a big difference at Community Alliance. I'll just start there. We really are focused on helping individuals with mental illness and substance use challenges achieve their unique potential to live, work and learn in the community. And we are that organization that provides a large array of services from your traditional mental health, but we also have rehabilitation and recovery-oriented services that help people live their daily lives. We really are trying to look at that whole person.

Lisa Bowen:

Great. Working with mental health is challenging. It's heavy work. What drew you into a career at Community Alliance and what's kept you there so long?

Aileen Brady:

It's interesting because I have spent the majority of my career here at Community Alliance, but I started out really at a hospital level of care. And I found myself wondering, I suppose the best word is, "What's it like at home for these guys? What's it like? What are they dealing with? What are the pressures and the stressors they're dealing with at home?," because when you're working in a hospital, from my perspective, it was a time when they could stabilize, they could get the medicine maybe that they were not able to get before, but we weren't really addressing the stressors at home.

And when I learned about Community Alliance and I learned about this kind of work, it really resonated for me that it's really about how people can manage day to day that might reduce that need for the hospitalization should they be able to manage their day-to-day lives a bit easier.

So, when I learned about Community Alliance, it was just the right fit for me. It was what I'd been thinking about and wondering about and wishing that I could be more a part of that individual's lives. And at Community Alliance I was able to do that, and we are still able to do that. So, we can in the moment, honestly, deal with situations that are stressful for people and try to alleviate those to help prevent perhaps those getting worse and worse for them. It's really been about that community-based mentality, that community-based care and service that drew me here, and it has kept me here.

I think the other thing that has really kept me here is our ability to innovate, respond to service needs as people are needing those. And I've been able to be a part of developing programs and services along the way throughout my career here.

Lisa Bowen:

I really love that you focus on keeping people out of the hospital, because we all know, at least anyone who's involved with healthcare in any way, shape, or form, knows that there's not enough beds and there's not enough people to care for the large number of people that need mental health services. So, I love that your programming focuses on wellness and lifestyle and keeping people out of that system.

Aileen Brady:

Exactly right.

Lisa Bowen:

You said you've been at Community Alliance a long time, but 40 plus years is an amazing career. You mentioned some innovative programs that you've been able to start and that's what you really like about Community Alliance. What are some of those successful programs or initiatives you've implemented? What are you most proud of?

Aileen Brady:

Yeah. That's a big question. There's just so many things I would say probably to start with. But I think that when we think about what Community Alliance does and what we have done over the years is that I could tell you a story, I think, about almost every program that we have started and how it started and why it started, because we have responded to the community's needs. We've had partners through the years approach us and say, "This is an area of need in this community. What can Community Alliance do about it?" And I'm really proud that we have partners and collaborations like that.

And throughout our history, I'm proud that we have been able to be responsive. An example I'll give you, whether it be housing or our homeless program, in both instances there, partners came up and said, "We need your help. This is an area that we feel you're missing." And while it was early in our history, it was an opportunity for us to listen and understand what our community needs.

And it's not really all that different now. Yes, there are more services, but there is also more need. And I think the need now is even more complex. So, I am really proud of the partnerships, really proud of the collaborations.

I think the other thing that I would like to add here is that our programs are practical. They're attentive to day-to-day people's needs. When we are able to see that people are feeling better, getting better, finding their recovery, I'm really proud of that, because people are getting better and that's what it's about, is being able to help those people along in their lives to return back to a more level, more stable lifestyle.

Lisa Bowen:

That's wonderful. And you should be proud of it. That's a huge accomplishment. Aileen, you talked a lot about partnerships and collaborations just now. Can you dive into that a little bit and talk about what some of those important partnerships have been for Community Alliance?

Aileen Brady:

I can. Yes. When we talk about partnerships and collaborations, I think it's really important that we know that when a party may come to us, it's their perspective on what the community need might be. We are in a position of wanting to listen and learn from that partner and be able to respond in a way that really meets all the objectives. Do we have the internal expertise to provide this service? We need to answer that in an honest kind of way. And we also need to be able to hear what that collaboration partner is looking for.

And again, there's so many stories that I could add to this conversation about how we have done that throughout the years. We want to be able to provide a level of care and a level of services and amount of services that people need now and perhaps in the future and for the length of time that they need it. And I think that, too, has been an ability for us to collaborate with partners.

Families have been a partnering collaborator since day one. We were started by family members. And you just can't ever underestimate the power of getting a group of people together and thinking through what is needed and working toward a solution.

Lisa Bowen:

Wonderful. We talked about the need. There's no surprise there. But you told us that one in three people in our community experience mental health challenges. Why do you think there's still a stigma around mental health services and how do you work to combat that stigma?

Aileen Brady:

There is still a stigma. And unfortunately, for whatever reason, people do not look at our brain as an organ of the brain that might need care. We wouldn't feel the stigma should it be a heart condition or diabetes. But I do think if you look back way back in our history, there may have been some stigma surrounding having cancer. But that has gone away.

But we're still dealing with the stigma surrounding a brain disease. And we know that a mental illness or substance use disorder, both are biological illnesses. They're biological brain disorders. And we have to keep on with our education. The stigma still exists. People feel like, "I should be able to do this. I should be able to take care of this or that. I shouldn't feel this way." Well, we really know we need to get rid of all those should and should nots, right, and help people know that it's okay not to be okay at times.

Not very many of us, if there's anyone out there, that says, "I'm a hundred percent independent. I don't need any help." Really, we all have people we rely on, family, friends. We rely on people. And that's a good thing. It's a good thing. We're human beings with natural connections to other people that helps us stay healthy and well.

And so, I think with this stigma, we still have some advances to make. We still have some education yet to provide. But I do think we've made a lot of progress. And I think even with the pandemic, we've made some progress. I believe that with our young adults, they are more open to mental health care. So, I think it's important that we continue to talk about it, we continue to emphasize that it's okay to reach out for help. That's why we want to do conversations with individuals like you and with anyone who is open to having these open conversations about mental health and substance use challenges. It's nothing to be ashamed of. It's truly not anything to be ashamed of. And we want people to begin to feel that internally also.

Lisa Bowen:

I love the statement, "It's okay to not be okay." That could not be more true. And I do think more people realize that today than ever before. So, I do think we're making progress there. So, if there was one thing that our listeners could do to help combat stigma, what do you think that would be?

Aileen Brady:

I think that when people hear any kind of disparaging comments that are made about others who are seeking out care or just about mental health or substance use in general, that I think we would ask them to speak up and counter that statement with friends or family. We know that there are still too many jokes about seeking out mental health care, and we have to speak up. We know that there's also myths that are out there that we need to speak up. So, I think I would ask your listeners to speak up when they hear things that are not accurate and then support the people around them that are seeking out care.

Or when they see someone that looks to be struggling, approach them, say something. That can be so empowering for the individual to have someone recognize that maybe everything isn't okay, and they get that affirmation, "Why don't you go talk to someone? There's nothing wrong with that." Encouraging statements from family and friends can be really powerful to help one seek out that help that they need.

So, I think those would be the main things. Speak up against disparaging comments, support people who are seeking out care, and then, of course, I should mention as well, if they feel they need support, talk to someone. Be brave enough to seek and take the courage to seek out care yourself.

Lisa Bowen:

I love that. So out of that, one in three people that have mental health issues, I'm going to assume that a lot of those people don't have the means to pay for the care they need. And one of the things I know about Community Alliance is that you champion health equity, so everyone who comes to you can access the services they need regardless of their income or insurance status. Can you talk a little bit about that and why that's important and what you do to make sure that that really happens?

Aileen Brady:

We do. I think I mentioned it earlier, but it's just important that everyone has equal access. Mental illness and substance use disorders can create poverty in one's life. And just because of that should not mean that they do not have access to services.

So, at Community Alliance, for anyone who is in need of services, they can walk in our doors and we can make sure we can figure out how we can provide that service for them. We do not want anyone to not walk through the doors and seek out the help they need because they're not sure, they're afraid of, "Well, it's going to cost too much." Come. We'll figure it out. We have a lot of insurances that we will accept. If you do not have any insurance, we can help out also. If you have no insurance, we can figure that out. Oftentimes, we, of course, work on an ability to pay. And if there is no insurance and no resources, we can find resources that will help. So, we just do not want anyone to feel that they cannot ask for help because they're fearful of insurance costs. We want them to come in.

Lisa Bowen:

That's great. The other thing that you talk a lot about at Community Alliance is integrated healthcare. What does that mean to you and how does it change the way you deliver mental health and substance abuse services?

Aileen Brady:

Yeah. And I appreciate you asking that question because we're a little bit unique in that way, because we have here a way to integrate both mental health, physical healthcare. So, we have a primary care clinic at Community Alliance with a family practice physician, and we have the ability to address the social wellbeing of individuals, as well as taking a look at how they can contribute to their community.

So, when we look at integrated care, we're looking at that whole person. It's a very whole person look at what their needs are in all of those areas. And so, when you think about someone's mental health status, a contributing factor can be unemployment, contributing factor can be not having appropriate housing, not having the financial resources to live as you want to live.

And so, we can help in all of those areas. And it contributes and each of those flow together. We're not a single being that is impacted by one thing in our lives. All of what are called the social determinants of health have an impact upon that individual. So, we take that kind of approach. It's a very holistic, broad approach to helping that individual with their primary care needs. Many, many people that we work with have health conditions that have gone untreated for many years. And so, we can provide that primary care service here at Community Alliance. So, they do not have to travel across town or what have you to another primary care provider. We have that right here at Community Alliance. The behavioral healthcare, the outpatient medication management, therapy services, we can provide that right here. And then the rehabilitation employment help, we have those services right here.

And it's almost like a one-stop shop. People use that term quite a bit. But we have a lot of services here. We also have a pharmacy at our agency. So, the convenience of being able to pick up your medications after your doctor's appointment makes it pretty nice, too.

Lisa Bowen:

That is great. The more convenient, the more compliant, I've heard in healthcare a lot. So that's wonderful.

Aileen Brady:

Exactly.

Lisa Bowen:

You mentioned earlier, you talked a little bit about how the pandemic may have helped get rid of a little bit of that stigma amongst some of the younger people that you serve. Were there any other impacts of COVID-19 and how it's affected the way you work or deliver services?

Aileen Brady:

Absolutely. In February of 2020, we were a completely in-person, face-to-face service delivery agency. By the middle end of March of 2020, we had become, for our outpatient services anyway, an almost exclusive telehealth provider. So, we very, very quickly changed over from an in-person face-to-face to telehealth to be able to continue to provide the services that our folks needed.

And so, we have been able to now have the best of both worlds, providing both face-to-face, in-person services, as well as telehealth where it's appropriate and needed. So, I think it's made us stronger in that way. I think that is one bright spot of the pandemic.

But we've also been impacted like everyone else in the world really. We are facing workforce shortages. We are looking at needing more staffing needs in a variety of programs, and we are seeing an increase in demand. There are more people with anxiety and depression than prior to the pandemic. So, I think we're still easing our way out of this pandemic. And the impact, I think, will be felt for years to come, honestly.

Lisa Bowen:

Agree. Agree. So, the next thing I want to talk about is something really exciting that you're working on that's right over my shoulder right now as we're having this conversation, is your new headquarters building. We're going to be neighbors soon. But can you tell us a little bit about that expansion and what it means to your organization and the community overall?

Aileen Brady:

I'm sitting here and we're talking, but I can appreciate that right over your shoulder is that building that's going up. And we are so excited for what this new building, this new program and office headquarters can do for the city of Omaha.

So, when we started to look at expansion, when we started to look at what the community need was, we knew that we needed first a location that was highly accessible for individuals. And so, this particular location, 71st and Mercy Rd., approximately, has good, easy access from the interstate. It has good bus routes, both on 72nd St. and on Mercy Rd. And it increases our visibility. So, we're hopeful that when people are in need of services, they know that they can get their mental health services here at Community Alliance.

People have told us that we sometimes are a best kept secret in Omaha. We don't want to be a secret. So, we think this location will help alleviate some of those issues of people not knowing, "What do I do when I feel like I need help?" So those are pretty important reasons.

But I think also what this will do for us is be able to give people access to healthcare, both primary care and behavioral healthcare, that perhaps they didn't before. Right now, we are in a nice space, we're in a great space, but we're running out of room. And that means when you can't add more staff, you don't have the space for staffing, you need an expanded location. And that's what this building will be able to do for us. We'll be able to increase our medication management, our primary care services, the assistance with employment, housing, the financial assistance that I talked about earlier. It provides resources in addition to what we have and what we are capable of doing now. So, we're just really

excited to be able to offer that to the community and be able to say, "Come on in. We're open for business."

Lisa Bowen:

Well, we're excited to have you as neighbors. And I guarantee you, if you get some good branding on that building, people won't be able to miss it, because it is a phenomenal location. So, what advice do you have for other leaders who want to make a difference in the world like you are, whether it's mental health or another cause?

Aileen Brady:

I think the first thing, and just speaking, I guess, for almost myself too, but just finding what you're passionate about and just going with that. I think that when you choose some complex causes, you have to remain persistent. You have to just keep moving forward despite perhaps running into obstacles. I think that with so many people, when you find that thing, that cause you're passionate about, you can figure out, "How do we help change the world for people?"

And while we may not be able to change the world right away, we can approach this by changing the world one person at a time. And you hear often that you could change the world for that one person, right? But by doing that, I think we can help change the world overall. And our work in mental health, our work in substance use, we have to keep working to increase the acceptance of services and to reduce that stigma. As we talked about earlier.

But I think we need passionate people who are willing to stand up and say, "It's okay not to be okay. It's okay that you need help. No matter your socioeconomic status, the job you have, the position you hold in the community, it's okay. It's okay to ask for that." And we need more and more leaders to step up and talk about maybe even some personal challenges that they've experienced.

There's one of the things that at Community Alliance, we bring in a national speaker, a celebrity of sorts that will talk about their own illness, will talk about their own struggles to try to normalize that a bit. So, I think for leaders who want to make the difference, it's finding ways to normalize a complex problem. And it's finding ways to speak up and speak out and not letting go of trying to make a difference if I can make a change.

Lisa Bowen:

I love that. I love the one person at a time approach. We work with lots of nonprofits, and there's so much work to be done that I know it can sometimes feel like you're not making an impact or there's no end in sight. So, I love that approach. That's a great attitude to have.

Aileen, I am inspired by motivational quotes. Can you give us a few of your own words of wisdom for our listeners?

Aileen Brady:

Well, that's so interesting that you say that, because, gosh, I love quotes, too.

Lisa Bowen:

You've given me quite a few already today and you don't even know it. So...

Aileen Brady:

A really, really important word that I, personally, love in our field that I'm going to add here at this point is, "With hope comes recovery and health." And I love that because, and I say that a lot to not only our staff, but to our people that we serve, too, because without hope, it's really hard to find in yourself the work that has to take place to get to recovery and to better health. Motivation to get better—it takes a lot of effort. It takes a lot of internal strength.

And Community Alliance is really just a guiding force for people. But the work of recovery and health has to come from inside that person. So, we have to start with hope. So, I love that, "With hope comes recovery and health." That's one of my quotes, one of my favorite ones.

Lisa Bowen:

I love that.

Aileen Brady:

I think also the other thing that I talk quite a bit about with our staff in particular is be genuine and intentional in your work to solve problems. And I think that that statement can be germane to a staff person who's working one-on-one with someone and trying to figure things out. But it's also, I think, appropriate for when leaders are looking to make changes within a system, because our system's not perfect. We all know that. But as we continue to work to solve the problems, if we can be genuine and very intentional and thoughtful about how to solve those problems, I think we're going to get a lot farther. So that's another quote I would give you.

Lisa Bowen:

I told you were full of great information.

Aileen Brady:

Thank you.

Lisa Bowen:

I'm sure you've inspired and piqued the interest of many, many people today as we've been talking. So, if someone's listening and wants to learn more about you or your organization, how can they find you?

Aileen Brady:

We have a variety of ways that they can come and contact us. And our website is one of those. And you can find us at Community-Alliance.org. That's Community-Alliance.org. They can sure give us a call. We have people who answer the phone. We do not have a automated system. So, we have actual people. So that's at 402-341-5128. And so, they can please call us as well.

But we also have a walk-in at our current location at 4001 Leavenworth, where people can come in and just find out, ask their questions. They may not be ready to enroll in services, but they have some questions. We have staff on hand that are ready to talk with them and provide information, resources, not only about ourselves, but if they have other needs that they may just have questions about. We're here to help them.

So, we'd like for people to join us in the efforts that we're making to really reach out to our community, and we hope that they would come and visit with us. We'd just be happy to talk with anyone about what we're working to accomplish and what we're working to accomplish with our community.

Lisa Bowen:

I think it's a breath of fresh air that you're so accessible to people and you answer the phones and you let people walk in for services. I think that's amazing and very necessary in your field. So, as we wrap up our time here today, what's the most important thing you want listeners to remember about the work you're doing? We've talked about so many great things. What would be the one thing that you really want people to remember?

Aileen Brady:

I appreciate you asking that question. I think I would want people to remember that people who are dealing with an illness, whether that be a mental illness, or a substance use illness, these are individuals who have many strengths and talents and contribute to our community. These are individuals who have most likely had experience with, just like everyone, many, many people have, "What trade am I going to go into? What college am I going to attend? What career am I going to have?" And there may have been a disruption to some of that education, but people are talented, artistic, they're parents, they're friends, they're our fellow parishioners in our churches.

I would want them to remember that anyone who has an illness is like all of us. It is us. It is you and I. And I want people to think that way rather than think it happens to other people. It happens to all of us in our own families. And I suspect that, with that one in three that we talked about earlier, that most people would understand that, but to appreciate those talents and those strengths that people have.

I think the other thing that I would like for people to recall is that people do recover, even when many times they come to us and they're in a crisis, they're in a pretty low spot. But people get better, people recover, and there's a bright future ahead. And not to lose sight of that, it can be difficult. But it's hard work. People put in that hard work, though, and they can get better. If we keep working toward reducing that stigma, we're going to get more and more people to hopefully say, "Yes, I would like some help. Yes, I'm ready to do the work. Yes, I want some guidance in how to accomplish what I really want to accomplish in my life." I think those would be the primary things to close with.

Lisa Bowen:

Awesome. Awesome. Awesome. Aileen, I really appreciate you taking the time to do this with us today. And I thank you for all the great work you've done in the community for the past 40 years and look forward to continuing to watch that new building go up and get a tour someday as well. And I'm so excited about the expanded services you're going to be able to offer with that growth.

Aileen Brady:

Well, thank you so much for the opportunity. We are excited as well. We have about one year from now before we'll be able to move into that new space. So, we're going to be doing some planning over the next several months to get ready to go. So, it will be in early 2024 that we'll be able to actually move in.

And we, of course, will have some open houses to invite the community and our new neighbors in to see us. We're looking forward to that as well. It's a great neighborhood. I've actually been able to participate in a couple of association meetings in the neighborhood already to start meeting our new neighbors. So that's been wonderful. We look forward to it.

Lisa Bowen:

That's great. Well, thank you so much.

Aileen Brady:

Yeah. Thank you, Lisa.

Announcer:

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities, or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from, visit KidGlov.com at K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com to get in touch. As always, if you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe, and share. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.