

Arkansas native “comes home” as Chief Nursing Officer at Unity Health

The search: Chief Nursing Officer

The organization: Unity Health, Searcy, AR

Primary organization contact: Mark Amox, CEO

Candidate selected: Karen Labonte, MSN

Challenge

Unity Health had been without a chief nursing officer (CNO) for several years. The north central Arkansas system had just gone through an executive leadership transition capped off with the hiring of a new chief executive officer, Mark Amox, in November 2022. Recognizing the system’s nurses lacked a voice in the C-suite and a champion for their critical role in the organization, his first priority as CEO was to hire a CNO. He selected Dallas-based HealthSearch Partners (HSP) to lead the search.

Solution

HSP had been engaged by the Unity Health board to recruit and place a new CEO in 2022. Amox was a candidate brought to the organization by HSP and in November he assumed the CEO role. As a candidate, he was familiar with HSP’s approach to executive search and its philosophy about working with the client and with candidates. So, he immediately contacted Neill Marshall, HSP chairman, about conducting the CNO search for Unity Health.

“I engaged HealthSearch Partners to conduct the search for a CNO for three reasons,” explained Amox. “First, the firm’s reputation for identifying and placing excellent executive talent. Second, I trusted them based on my experience as a candidate. Finally, I felt they really understood our organization and would be able to realistically explain to candidates the nuances of Unity Health and what it’s like living in a smaller town like Searcy.”

Even though it had just conducted the CEO search for Unity Health, HSP approached the CNO search with fresh eyes. “Neill, Ed Fry, and the other HSP consultants listened to my vision for the role,” said Amox. “They also wanted to hear what our leadership and board had to say to help shape the search. The background work on candidates was thorough so when I got on the phone with them, I felt like I already knew them, their ‘why’ and what was driving them.”

Amox and the organization had specific qualities they were looking for in the new CNO. First, a tie to or willingness to live in Searcy and in Arkansas. Second, someone who didn’t view the opportunity as a steppingstone in his or her career.



Unity Health is a 502-bed, four-hospital system in north central Arkansas and headquartered in Searcy, AR. With more than 2,300 associates, it is the area’s largest employer. The system’s medical staff includes more than 160 physicians representing a broad array of primary and specialty care practitioners.

Rather, someone who was committed to the position for the long-term. Three, someone who was comfortable working in a faith-centric organization and faith-centric community. Four, someone who would fit with Unity Health's culture and someone the organization's nurses could identify with and rally behind.

Results

"From the moment I had my first video interview with Karen Labonte, I knew I had found the right person to be CNO," said Amox. "HSP did a fantastic job of sourcing qualified candidates, they were all top-notch. It came down to who I felt I could work with, who would be my partner, and who would be able to lean in and hear the voice of our nursing team and represent them well. Besides being extremely smart, Karen has a unique way of communicating that draws you in. You want to listen to what she has to say. I also knew she was a perfect fit for our organizational culture."

Even though it was Labonte's first search experience with HSP, she appreciated the process. "Working with HSP was great," said Labonte. "Neill provided me with all of the information I would have had to research – the organization, the leaders, the role – so that saved me a lot of time. He helped me prepare for the interview and he set realistic expectations. I felt very confident and after my interview he shared what they viewed as my strengths and opportunities. Getting that immediate feedback was invaluable."

Going into the interview process, Labonte, an Arkansas native and a graduate of Southern Arkansas University, said she had two personal priorities – the location of the job and whether she felt she could work with the CEO. "The Unity Health CNO position checked both of those boxes," she said. "When I met Mark online for the first time, I knew I really wanted to work with him. I think Neill knew Mark and I would be a great team, and that I would be a great fit for the organization."

"I think the world of HSP and its consultants," explained Amox. "In my opinion, you're not going to find more qualified search consultants. Based on this experience I felt not only did they have my best interests at heart, but I also made a friend during the process. I have no problem giving a colleague Neill's cell number and telling him or her to call him and tell him Mark referred me."

Read Unity Health's [press release](#) about Karen Labonte's appointment as CNO.



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