

Q&A

WITH
RILEY
AKERVIK

BY MIKE MUCHA



Mike Mucha, GFOA's deputy executive director, spoke with **Riley Akervik**, the financial director for the Central Valley Health District in Jamestown, North Dakota, about leadership, community service, networking, and the role of GFOA's small government forum in building connections between rural finance officers.

Mike: Can you tell us about Central Valley Health District and specifically what your role is as financial director?

Riley: Central Valley Health is a public health organization that services Stutsman and Logan Counties in North Dakota. We also contract with six other counties to provide support. Our mission is to prevent, promote, and protect for optimal community health—we do this by providing a wide range of services including nursing services, vaccinations and immunizations, in-home care, environmental health, injury and substance abuse prevention/education, and emergency preparedness/planning.

My role as financial director takes on many forms, but I mostly lead financial operations, including our budget and financial reporting processes. We have a small office, and many staff members take on multiple roles. I noticed that I could help with other administrative tasks and have taken on roles including benefits coordinator, building management, asset management, and other small human resource tasks.

Not having worked for government or a public health organization before, what interested you in this role?

I went to school for business and wanted to become a financial planner. After I graduated, I worked for Ameriprise Financial in this role. It wasn't the right fit for me and was on the lookout for a new position. One of the board members for Central Valley Health District was also employed at The University of Jamestown, where I got my degree, and mentioned the position to me. When I went to college, I thought I wanted to be a nurse, and this position seemed like a great opportunity to blend my interests in healthcare and finance.

So, you took the job with no past public finance experience?

I did. I knew I had a lot to learn. The position had a heavy focus on accounting, and I didn't have an accounting background—but I knew I'd have a good mentor. Unfortunately, she was forced to leave the organization very early in my tenure and I was on my own after

only two months on the job. Ultimately, it worked out well. I have a great team and wasn't afraid to ask questions. I also built a strong relationship with our external auditor and was able to ask if there were areas where I needed assistance.

You've now been in the job a little more than a year and a half. What would you say is the most important thing you've been able to learn?

While I've enjoyed learning the technical accounting aspects of the job, the most important thing I've learned are time management skills. The previous financial director was not very approachable and maintained a "closed door" style in the office. When I came in, I could tell the staff thought I would be the same, but that's not me. I needed to be able to prioritize my tasks so I could be a good coworker and make them feel welcome. At the time, none of my staff were comfortable asking questions. For example, some were underutilized at times but didn't want to ask for more to do. I needed to teach them how to ask questions and put myself in a position where I could help.

As the newest and presumably youngest person on the team, was it ever intimidating to lead an experienced staff?

The average employee at Central Valley Health has been in the organization for 12 years. At times, I would say that my lack of experience presented a bit of a challenge, but not among the staff. There were occasional comments from community members, but it didn't bother me—I like to prove people wrong.

Lack of experience does not define the quality of your work, and you can't define someone by age or experience. I know I can produce quality outcomes and try to show that to those who show me resistance.

Are there any examples you can highlight?

I shared this example with the class at GFOA's Leadership Academy that I attended recently. I'm currently trying to start a men's health program for the community. There is a need as recent data shows that 84% of suicides in North Dakota are males. Data also shows that over 75% of men in North Dakota have not gone to the doctor in the last five years. Our research shows a large equity gap in our communities, and we need to do something about it. Over time, my goal is to raise awareness for the program and start generating revenue to sustain the effort.

Also, in my first year, we employed better strategies for collecting on insurance claims and tracking clients, which allowed us to increase our fee revenue by 18 percent. We've also been busy on a number of other projects that allow us to better serve the community. Central Valley Health hadn't increased environmental fees in approximately ten years, and there was a huge gap between our costs and what other public health agencies in the state were charging. Ultimately, we were able to get our board to increase rates, which will be an important revenue source and allow us to expand services.

We do have challenges ahead. During the pandemic, public health got a bad rap. We were often seen as bad guys, and citizens weren't seeing our good work in the community—which was tough. We find ourselves having to overcome this reputation. While overall activity



Above, Riley attends award ceremony where one of his staff members was awarded the Young Professional of the Year in Jamestown.

has been down recently, we feel like we are in a strong position for the future. We've been able to retain staff and are working on making investments that will allow us to expand our services.

It looks like you've also been successful at seeking out leadership opportunities beyond work in the community. Can you explain the roles you've volunteered for?

When I got out of college, I was asked to join a few community organizations here in Jamestown, but I turned them all away. I was afraid of getting involved in too many things at once and wanted to establish myself in my new job. Before long, though, I was ready and wanted to get involved and felt like I could contribute, so I joined the Young Professionals of Jamestown. It's a group that provides networking opportunities for individuals who are new to their careers. We meet monthly, and it has been a great opportunity to engage with speakers and other leaders from the community. I also serve on the Executive Committee for this group, and

assist the program in gaining members and providing new opportunities.

I'm also a board member for the Jamestown Fine Arts Association, where I also serve on the annual fundraiser and Finance Committees. I have recently been involved in a \$2 million capital campaign with the organization as well. I've really enjoyed this experience and feel like I can combine my passion for the arts with my knowledge of finance.

You've also recently joined GFOA's advisory committee for the Small Government Forum. How did GFOA help with your orientation process to local government?

When I started my job, my mentor recommended that I join GFOA and the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). At the time, I was a bit overwhelmed and put it off. A few months later, I saw a post on LinkedIn for one of GFOA's research reports, it seemed interesting, and I remembered the recommendation to join. So, I joined and started checking out the website.



Located in Stutsman County, **Jamestown** is the ninth largest city in North Dakota and is located midway between the state capitol, Bismarck, and Fargo, the state's largest city. Known as the "Pride of the Prairie," Jamestown is also home to the World's Largest Buffalo, the National Buffalo Museum, and the North Dakota Sports Hall of Fame.

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Not long after, I received an email about the Small Government Forum and joined that as well. If there is a good opportunity, I'm going to try to get in. The same thing happened recently with GFOA's Leadership Academy—I saw the invitation to apply and figured I would try it.

You attended the Leadership Academy in February 2023 at the College of Charleston. How was your experience, and what advice would you give to someone who's interested in attending?

The week exceeded my expectations. Before the Leadership Academy, I had participated in a few remote events through the Small Government Forum, but I'd never been to a GFOA event. It was a great networking opportunity. I established relationships with colleagues whom I would now call friends. We would get together after class, get dinner and drinks, and one night we even went to do karaoke. That networking opportunity was really valuable and not something I'd done before.

I also enjoyed the discussion with Bob O'Neill on leadership. He provided personal lessons as a public leader and public servant. One thing I remember him highlighting was innovation and creativity. A lot of people don't look for those skills in the workforce. As we talk about the need to get younger members involved in GFOA and in government, I really think that these younger professionals can provide a new perspective. There needs to be an appreciation of creativity—it's hard to come by and can provide significant value for an organization when you have it.

Another takeaway came from the session taught by Van Johnson, the mayor of Savannah, Georgia. He talked about the role of a leader in preparing people to leave your organization. You don't want to see them go, but the mark of a good leader is that you can prepare others to lead.

How would you assess your own leadership style?

I try to be heavily focused on the people I work with—I believe in servant

leadership. When I was in college, I wrote a paper on the three components of a good leader: passion, purpose, and people. If a leader can understand their own purpose, who they are, and what they stand for, then they can have a passion for what they believe in. If someone has a purpose and a passion, they can take care of those around them.

I've tried to be consistent and better understand my own personal values. If you don't understand and lead yourself, I don't know how you can do that for other people.

GFOA has been working to develop leadership skills, and we understand the importance of finance officers being successful leaders. If you were looking to develop someone with leadership potential, how would you approach it?

There is a difference between a manager and a leader. As finance officers, we need to be both. As a manager, we need to get the job done, and I see managers being more task-oriented. Being a leader is different, though, and I don't think it can be easily taught. If a young person is a leader, they can pick up the task-oriented skills and bring a new perspective to the organization. As someone in a leadership position, I think it's my role to help identify those people who already possess leadership potential and help put them in positions to succeed.


You've brought up several times the importance of networking. GFOA is working to build a stronger network in rural areas, but overall membership numbers remain somewhat low. Any guidance on how we can recruit more members to GFOA?

One reason why I enjoy the Small Government Forum is that I feel like I can connect with peers who are like me, lead similar organizations, and face similar challenges. One challenge for small, rural governments is succession planning. When talented individuals leave an organization, it can be extremely difficult to find replacements without a network. One thing that GFOA can do is reach

out and make sure that members are getting involved in groups like the Small Government Forum. I recently found out that GFOA has a network of regional or state associations that provide networking opportunities. I'm not aware if one exists in North Dakota. Actually, I'm not sure I've even met another GFOA member from North Dakota.*

I believe that your network is worth more than your net worth. If I can take some time to complain about a stereotype of younger generations, there is so much focus on money. I try to focus on my network. How am I treating others? How does the community view this? For me, personally, I've received other opportunities and I'm confident that my network is the key to my future success.

It's clear that you've been able to make connections in Jamestown and have staked out a leadership role. I also know that you are relatively new to Jamestown and North Dakota. Is there anything special about the state that you now call home?

I really enjoy the community feeling. I grew up in a small town in Minnesota that had about 4,000 people. Jamestown is actually quite a bit bigger, with a population just under 20,000. The town is large enough that you don't know everyone, but things still feel familiar. A lot of people who work in larger communities may not get to see the tangible results of their work, and I'm grateful that I do. I see clients walk in the door. I see the benefits to the community from the boards that I serve on. It's all very tangible. In this area, everyone is also approachable. I've been able to build a network because I wasn't afraid to reach out. With a quick email or phone call, I've set up time to talk over coffee, and I feel that I can go to anyone and at any level if they are willing to give me thirty minutes to be a sponge and absorb information from them. 

Mike Mucha is the deputy executive director of GFOA.

**GFOA has 61 members from the State of North Dakota, representing nine out of the largest ten cities in the state. The one exception is Jamestown—although the county that Jamestown is located in (Stutsman County) is also a member.*