

INTRODUCING

Nurses on Boards

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March 2017

What was your path to the Ralston board presidency?

I spent much of my career at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Nursing leading large groups of people, doing strategic planning and dealing with large budgets. My nursing knowledge and gerontology expertise combined with my extensive administrative experience feels like optimal preparation for leading this particular organization at this time. In one way or another, the work I've done all my life has prepared me for this board leadership role.

When I joined Ralston's board in 2007, the organization provided homecare services, transportation, and health and wellness programs. When the board's prior president stepped down in 2011, I was named as the successor president by the board. Soon after, our CEO died unexpectedly. In the wake of this tragic loss, my leadership role very quickly shifted to the search for a new CEO and evolved to define who we are, what we are and where are going. It took us six months to find a new CEO.

How much time do you spend as president of the board?

I attend every finance meeting, every development meeting, every strategic planning meeting, every pension and personnel meeting, all our events and frequent meetings with donors. Leading this board currently feels like a half time job, which I combine with my consulting practice. On average I probably spend 10 to 12 hours a week on Ralston.

What have you found especially gratifying about leading this board?

I love Ralston's mission to improve health and quality of life among older adults in Philadelphia. Soon after I was named president, I urged the Ralston board to consider adding a new direction. Our board and staff learned about what was meant by the World Health Organization's commitment to create more age-friendly environment. We worked with consultants and received input from more than 40 organizational stakeholders in partnership with the Mayor's office, the Philadelphia Corporation for Aging and many community groups to identify and prioritize the most pressing needs of older West Philadelphians.

**AT A GLANCE**

Ralston Center – [president, Board of Directors](#)

University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing – [retired former interim dean, Edith Clemmer Steinbright Professor in Gerontology, former Faculty Senate Chair, former director Adult Gerontology nurse practitioner program \(first-round funding recipient, John A. Hartford Foundation Institute for the Advancement of Geriatric Nursing\), and recipient of Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching](#)

American Academy of Nursing – [Fellow Foulkeways at Gwynedd Continuing Care Retirement Community – member, board of directors](#)

Established scientific basis for restraint-free care as standard of practice through decades-long research, publications, Congressional testimony and work with professional organizations and regulatory agencies

This profile is funded in part through the generous support of the Rita & Alex Hillman Foundation.

We decided to work to make West Philadelphia better for older adults' health, well-being and ability to age in place. I'm very excited about our initiatives, launched in 2016, to make West Philadelphia a model age-friendly neighborhood. We're working to: make public parks and public places such as bus shelters safer and more inviting; increase access to aging resources and supports, and alleviate social isolation; and improve access to fresh food and strengthen social connections through communal cooking.

As an experienced leader, what key lessons have informed your tenure as board president?

Leading a nonprofit board is like running a family. You have to be mindful of everyone's issues. You need exquisite interpersonal skills so you don't offend people and so everyone feels like they've contributed.

It takes a while to get people to trust you to take even well-defined, organizationally valid strategic risks. Despite the fact that I have wonderful relationships with the board and was aware of this dynamic beforehand, I can't just plow my way through and say, "This is what we're going to do."

There are important yet complex tensions between boards and staff. We have a very fine small professional staff comprised of seven full-time people. The board's role is strategic and fiduciary; and operations are the staff's responsibility. There are lines between those roles. This has turned out to be more complicated than I realized.

What nursing-related values and skills do you bring to board leadership?

Values I've honed personally as a nurse and among the nurses I've trained include above all respect for people, and a willingness to listen, compromise and make decisions. These are all values of nursing and of any committed health professional.

Some of my nursing-related skills include consensus-building, strategic planning, organizational leadership, knowledge of the elderly, and strong networks of connections cultivated over decades among colleagues at many community-based organizations involved in elder services in Philadelphia. These longstanding relationships helped Ralston develop its more expansive mission and service-focused partnerships.

What's on your wish list for an effective board member?

We're a small nonprofit with a big mission and we expect a lot of our board members in terms of their contribution of time and expertise. As board president, I helped Ralston develop a more professional board structure with revisions so our bylaws now include term limits, a nine-year term that can be renewed just once. As people cycle off the board, we look for new board members with needed expertise. Our board now provides Ralston with expertise in core areas such as finance, architecture, construction, law and marketing. We're currently looking for new board members with capabilities in development and public relations.

Key traits for new board members include: eagerness to be an advocate for the organization's mission, willingness to participate and bring expertise to the board, readiness to make a financial commitment at whatever level they can, and desire to encourage and link us to others who might be interested in contributing.

Leadership readiness is also important. Board presidents truly shape organizations; and this leadership role can't just be handed off to the next person in line. Every board should do leadership succession planning. You can't and shouldn't do this work forever! After we conclude our 200th anniversary celebrations, my next focus will be to identify and groom a successor board president who will continue to revitalize the Ralston Center.

By Jessica Stein Diamond