

PUBLICATION

Women in Long Term Care: Bridgette Uhlemann of Life Care Services

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Christy Tosh Crider, founder of the Firm's Long Term Care Team, recently interviewed Life Care Services' Vice President/Corporate Counsel and Director of Legal Compliance, Bridgette Uhlemann, to get her perspective on careers in long term care and how COVID-19 has impacted the industry.



How did you get started in long term care (LTC)?

It was happenstance. I was in private practice in Des Moines, Iowa doing litigation and was interested in going in-house. Life Care Services (LCS) posted a transactional position; I applied and got the job. At first, my job was primarily transactional and governance work, but has changed dramatically over the last six years. Long term care is an exciting and rewarding career. It is fun to find creative solutions to issues that arise.

How has your role changed in the last six years?

In January of 2020, LCS reorganized the legal and compliance departments, and I became Director of Legal and Compliance. I have three attorneys on my team who focus on transactions, governance work, and contract review. The other 12 members of our department focus on providing compliance support to our communities by assisting with regulatory filings, policies and procedures, and training. Every day is different, and there is a lot of strategy involved. I spend a lot of time finding solutions and removing roadblocks.

We work hard to be proactive and ensure that our team is properly structured. Ultimately, our goal is to serve our residents the best way we can. LCS has communities in over 30 states, so our department faces new and unique challenges frequently. We appreciate the guidance we have gotten from our attorneys at Baker Donelson and your excellent team.

How does COVID-19 change the way LTC looks going forward?

COVID-19 has changed the way LCS serves seniors, and I believe we will emerge stronger after the pandemic is over. LCS is the second largest senior living operator in the United States, and it was amazing to see how quickly our company was able to pivot when the pandemic started. Because of our breadth of knowledge and depth of teams, we were able to source PPE and other supplies our communities needed to fight COVID-19.

We launched a new program called EverSafe 360°, which established new safety standards in our home office and communities. One facet of Eversafe 360° centers on improving on sanitation and indoor air quality, so LCS partnered with Proctor & Gamble to recommend environmentally-friendly cleaning products and chemicals for deep cleaning, as well as techniques such as UVC lighting and needlepoint ionization to purify the air in our communities. This new initiative also looks at indoor space design to ensure social distancing and telemedicine.

The start of the COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time, but it was a huge opportunity for us to step up, become better, and build a stronger company. I believe people show what they are made of when they are challenged, and I am so proud of LCS and how we responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The vast majority of facility-level staff and residents are women, yet most C-Suites and boards of LTC companies have little gender parity. LCS has strong women in high-level positions. How does that make you a better organization?

The lack of gender parity in high-level corporate positions is not just an issue in senior living; it is unfortunately an issue in almost every industry, and the COVID-19 pandemic only perpetuates this problem as more women are leaving the workforce. At LCS, I am lucky to work with numerous strong, smart, and dedicated women.

Two of our C-Suite executives are women. I report to Diane Bridgewater, our CFO. Diane is a visionary leader who is guided by a great moral compass. Monica Friedman, our Chief Human Resources Officer, is a strategic leader who ensures we have the right workforce in place. I think it is important to have diverse leadership because it helps ensure various viewpoints are represented and considered. For example, we are implementing a hybrid work schedule in our home office with more opportunities for remote work going forward. I think Diane and Monica advocated for this flexible work arrangement because it is a win-win for our employees; it gives people flexibility to work remotely and also helps us retain great talent. Diane and Monica also advocated to develop the future leaders of our company by supporting mentoring, development, and coaching opportunities.

LCS recently identified 20 individuals across our company to complete an Executive Leadership Development Program, which helps develop future leaders. That group has gender parity, which sets us up to continue our success of female representation at every level of leadership. The more diverse voices that are heard, the better we can serve the residents under our care.

How has being a mom affected your career and how has your career affected being a mom?

I have two girls, ages four and one. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I was five months pregnant and my two-year-old was at home because daycares were closed. My husband is an attorney as well with a demanding career. Every morning, we would get up early, compare calendars, and schedule our workday so one of us could parent while the other worked. Most of our head-down work happened early in the morning or late at night. As working parents, we all ask if we are doing the best we can, for both our families and careers.

There is a lot to juggle, but I try to divide my priorities into two categories – glass balls and plastic balls. The really important parts of my life – birthdays, school programs, large work projects – are glass balls. I focus my time and energy on making sure the glass balls aren't dropped. But there are a lot of plastic balls too – like dress up days at my kids' school – where if that ball hits the ground, everything will still be fine. I think having a career I love makes me a better mom because I feel fulfilled and can project that satisfaction to my children.

My mom's passion for her career as a sixth-grade science teacher and the joy it brought her was a wonderful example to me growing up. She juggled a lot of priorities, but she never missed a birthday. I remember her always encouraging me to work hard and do the right thing. I learned from the best and I hope to project that same passion to the people I work with and my daughters.