

FIRST-TIME CEO

Fraker pivots from nursing to association leadership at OMA

Obesity Medical Association's Executive Director Teresa Fraker makes decisions that create welcome change

By Michael Berman

A seasoned private sector executive and caregiver, Teresa Fraker has a full picture of the health care industry. Nursing experience paired with leadership expertise has led to a fulfilling career transition, from hospital administrator to health care association executive director.

Fraker arrived at Obesity Medical Association (OMA) in October 2021, and she connects the dots between her board of directors and staff by showing both parties that their work has meaning. Her leadership involves decision-making that puts her in the driver's seat like never before. Fraker utilizes this opportunity to enact positive change in the health care sector.

From caregiver to executive

Fraker has contributed professionally to the health care system for more than 30 years. She received her nursing degree from the University of Iowa and earned a master's degree in health services administration from the University of St. Francis in Illinois. She started her career as a nurse at Iowa's Mercy Hospital and Medical Center. She progressed to a nurse manager role in 2003 and a director role in 2009 at Genesis Health Systems, also based in Iowa, where she spent the bulk of her career working with bariatric surgery and obesity-related care. Although Fraker left direct patient care behind in 2013, she says her nursing education and experience stays with her.

What drew Fraker to OMA? "I've worked in the space of obesity care since 2003. So, it's just kind of an area that I've had a passion and an interest in, clinically and administratively," she said.

There were other deciding factors. The demanding nature of working in a hospital was taking a toll. "The work of a hospital administrator, you never turn that off. It's 365, 24/7," Fraker said. After surviving the challenges COVID brought, she needed a job that was less stressful.

"I really felt like I missed that hospital side so desperately, and I wanted to get back in the trenches as a nurse as a direct caregiver. But I figured out quickly after the pandemic that I probably wasn't supposed to go back there, because the place that I left wasn't going to be the same again," she said.

The transition from hospital administrator to health care association executive has driven Fraker to succeed in new ways. She has "leaned into the work of quality-based metrics and evidence-based practice" to help hospitals improve patient outcomes.

Facilitating a transition

The recruitment for Fraker's current position was handled by Sterling Martin Associates.

"I would tell you that even if I had not been selected by the board selection committee, the process with them was just fabulous," she said. "For me as a candidate, I felt extremely well prepared."

Now settled into the executive director role at OMA, Fraker is thriving. "It has created for me a wonderful professional complement, because I still hang out with my surgical tribe. But now I'm living in this medicine space. The harmonization between the medical providers and the care of patients with obesity has been a wonderful professional opportunity. It still feeds my engine of the love and passion that I have for our patients," Fraker said.

Educating health care professionals

OMA is the go-to place for health care professionals who want to learn more about obesity and how to manage it. Services include in-person and virtual education; products such as books, manuals and pocket guides; and an academy that functions as a learning management system. "Individuals can go into the academy and have access to over 500 enduring courses on any topic related to obesity across the spectrum," Fraker said.

OMA has a network of over 5,000 members, most of them in North America, and has been in existence since 1950. Headquartered in Colorado, the association is known for its comprehensive knowledge of obesity and tools for disease management.

A professional panacea

Fraker always imagined herself working in a hospital, but association life has been a welcome next step.

Upon arrival at OMA, Fraker rolled up her sleeves and got to work. "We had no employee

manual. I had an employee whose grandmother passed away, and she asked me, 'What's our bereavement policy?' and we didn't have one." Becoming the author of this manual and making other essential decisions was a process with which Fraker became comfortable, with support from the community she was building.

"I've found myself kind of creating my own tribe of other CEOs and executive directors, in similar health care organizations, size and scope, and hanging out with a whole lot of HR people, becoming very good friends with those folks," Fraker said. This community has been a productive place for Fraker to brainstorm possible solutions before putting them into practice.

Fraker aims to show OMA's stakeholders that what they do has an impact. "I connect the work of our board with staff's day-to-day work, so that it gives everyone meaning and purpose," she said.

She's making the decisions, but Fraker's still driven by the same passion — to help others — that launched her nursing career. ■

