

# SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

THE COMMUNITY OF BUSINESS™

AUGUST 3, 2015

SAN DIEGO COUNTY'S AWARD-WINNING BUSINESS WEEKLY

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## Lyford Readies for Her New Leadership Role at West Health

**RESEARCH:** As CEO, She'll Look to Unify Efforts To Support Senior Population

■ By BRITTANY MEILING

If you're looking to find a charismatic executive with a New York City tongue, Vermont's dairy country probably wouldn't be your starting point. Nevertheless, that rural region is where **Shelley Lyford** cultivated her ambition and her passion.

Both were evident in a recent interview.

As we chatted, she attempted to slow her speech — perhaps as a courtesy to me, who was furiously typing her every word — but soon, her enthusiasm took over, and we were back at top speed.

Lyford, 40, was energetic, vibrant and unabashedly intense as we talked about the future of **West Health**, the collection of organizations she will lead as chief executive in September.

As CEO, Lyford will assume management of two additional West Health organizations — the **West Health Policy Center** in Washington, D.C., and the medical research arm **West Health Institute** — in addition to continuing her position as CEO of the **Gary and Mary West Foundation**. Collectively, the independent organizations are known as West Health, and all were developed under philanthropists **Gary and Mary West**.

Lyford will be the youngest CEO at West Health since its inception, a funny polarity for an organization focused on seniors and aging.

Although young, she is undoubtedly the most qualified for the job. Lyford played a critical role in establishing the Gary and Mary West Foundation in 2006, which is now the second-largest private foundation in San Diego. For the last eight years, Lyford has been serving as its president and CEO, overseeing philanthropy with a focus on impacting the lives of disadvantaged seniors.

The foundation supports organizations such as **Serving Seniors**, a group that provide meals, supportive services, health education, affordable housing and lifelong learning opportunities for seniors in San Diego County. The foundation also supports the **Gary and Mary West Senior Wellness Center**, a health club for those over 60.

Prior to her work with Gary and Mary West, Lyford was a director at the **Cystic Fibrosis Foundation** and the **Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice** at the University of San



Beginning in September, Chief Executive Officer Shelley Lyford will lead West Health, which is focused on helping older people age gracefully and with dignity. Melissa Jacobs

**Diego.** She currently sits on the Executive Committee of **Grantmakers in Aging**.

Lyford recently answered questions for the **San Diego Business Journal**:

**What attracted you to this new position within West Health?**

I have been part of the creation of West Health from the very first day. I've seen the positive impact that we've had on the lives of seniors through the foundation for the past eight years, and I know that it's going to parlay into something much bigger here through the mechanisms we have at the research institute and the policy center in D.C.

I don't have 30 years of health care experience like the former CEO of West Health, but I do have the deep passion, knowledge and expertise in the aging arena.

**What will you focus on first as you move into your role as CEO?**

With the transition of leadership, we're transitioning our strategy as well. We'll have one unified strategy that we call "Successful Aging," and

under that we'll have the policy center, the foundation and the institute. We've always segmented the different organizations, but we're not doing that anymore. We have one body of work and one strategy, and that is focusing on enabling seniors to age on their own terms with grace, dignity and health.

**Why is West Health now focusing on successful aging?**

I'm sure you've seen the statistics that every eight seconds someone turns 65. The demographic shift in the United States is something we've never experienced before, and we have to find a new way of living as we age.

West Health has focused on lowering the cost of health care in the past, and that has continued throughout the years. But we weren't so discrete, and we had projects ranging from rehabilitation and high-risk pregnancy to interoperability. That whole portfolio has informed our thinking with respect to successful aging.

There will always be a very important place for health care in a hospital setting. But as we move forward, we'll

be focusing on the management of chronic conditions, and all the supportive services a person needs to be successfully independent. Those are things that can be delivered through community-based organizations that are far less expensive, more accessible and provide a higher quality of care. **What is the most daunting part of taking this position?**

Following in the footsteps of such a tremendous leader, **Nick Valeriani**: He has taught me a great deal about leadership. He is tremendously thoughtful, deliberate and has such a gentle way about him. He, more than anyone, stands for our culture and our people.

**What are your interests outside of work?**

I really love traveling. I studied international relations at the **University of San Diego**, and I actually wanted to be a diplomat working at an embassy one day. That interest in international travel has never subsided. I also love my two rescue dogs and horseback riding at **Tartan Farms** in Del Mar.