



Director of the Wyoming Department of Health

Ceballos Takes Helm for Health

IN JANUARY, GOV. MARK GORDON APPOINTED MIKE CEBALLOS TO LEAD THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH. CEBALLOS BRINGS DECADES OF BUSINESS AND STATE BOARD EXPERIENCE TO THE ROLE.

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Ask Mike Ceballos what he knows about health and he'll tell you he doesn't have to know everything, that he's in a position of learning and listening, and it's a role for which he's well suited.

"This is where my generalist background pays off," Ceballos said in a September phone interview. "You can't be the subject matter expert in all areas."

In January, the Democrat was tapped by Republican Governor Mark Gordon to replace a retiring Tom Forslund, to lead one of the state's largest agencies. Ceballos and Gordon connected in their work on the Wyoming Retirement System Board, on which Ceballos continues to serve as a member at-large.

Since retiring from Qwest, now known as CenturyLink, in 2011, Ceballos has kept busy. In 2014, he ran (and lost) a bid for Superintendent of Public Instruction. He began his work on a PhD in educational leadership at the University of Wyoming and has just one class remaining. A clear nod, he says, to his generalist approach in his career.

For 30 years at Qwest, Ceballos was in "learning mode," he says, citing the 14 different roles he filled before retiring as the telecommunications carrier's Wyoming state president.

"When you've held many positions, you set up a different way for making decisions," he explains.

As Director of the Wyoming Department of Health, Ceballos is heading out on a listening tour, visiting communities around the state to hear from patients, local leaders, and providers. When it comes to the latter, he wants to learn what they do and how they do it. (The Department of Health issues press

releases in advance of the listening tour events, and those releases also are shared on the department's website.)

He sees a lot of commonality in his capacity as a business leader and now a leader in the public sector. His approach at Qwest was to "get close to the customers," and that's an opportunity he believes dovetails with his current role.

"I'd like for us (the Department of Health) to be innovative, take risks, and I don't see that as being much different from where I came from (professionally)," he explains. "State employees do have ownership over their work... I think maybe it's an assumption that the state doesn't do things effectively and efficiently with best practices."

Cultivating a culture of curiosity and continuous improvement leads to his encouragement of innovation and new ideas. When things don't go as planned, his approach will be to regroup, debrief and learn.

"That's important in today's world with a such a quick change of pace," he notes. "The challenge in our work is that we're going to do this, then you can't tell me all the good things. What's working? What's not? Where are the struggles?"

Early in his conversations with Gordon, Ceballos says he recognized the critical importance of healthcare policy and leadership.

"I wanted to take this opportunity to apply what I've learned in business to help the department meet its challenges," he explains. "Plus, when your governor asks you to take a role, that's a request that's hard to ignore."

The key to his success in this role will be engaging with customers, he says, noting it's a similar approach to his work with

Qwest customers in Wyoming.

“We should explore best practices from business for ideas we can employ in government to improve our effectiveness (in communities),” he explains. “It’s trying to get as close to the customer as you can. One of the direct deliverables is community visits.”

Ceballos’ interest is in having community members come forward before there’s a problem, so he’s being prospective in going to the providers, and setting up meetings at community-minded facilities, and visiting with public health nurses and other key stakeholders.

Those relationships include legislators he says, but he’s also come to recognize the critical nature of the work county commissioners do in partnership with providers in Wyoming. Health is one of the state’s biggest spenders with a nearly \$2 billion budget (\$900 million of which comes from federal coffers).

As such, Ceballos is well-aware money can’t be the only issue raised by his department, providers and other stakeholders. Instead, his attention will turn on efficiently spending what has been appropriated. If the community meetings lead people to tell him they simply need more money, he says, then he doesn’t really need to visit.

“Tell me what’s working,” he says. “Tell me what’s not and tell me why and what you would do.”

Hard decisions will have to be made, that’s the job of a department director.

“I understand we can’t be everything for everyone,” Ceballos says. “I want to work with my staff, stakeholders and state leadership to develop and understand our priorities for state and private efforts.”

Ceballos is no stranger to the question of managing an aging population in a rural state.

“That will affect us all,” he explains. “We expect heavy budget pressures in Medicaid as a result and there will be increased demand for care. What can be done to help keep people in their homes as long as possible?”

Mental health emerges an issue, too. Can people in crisis get the help they need?

And that circles around to attracting and retaining talent. Prioritizing mental health care practitioner recruitment and retention is key. That means attracting younger people to the profession and figuring out how to retain the people with the knowledge and experience.

While expertise in Wyoming is remarkable, there’s also the reality that small, rural states don’t always have the resources or customers. Salaries are high. Physicians are in demand.

“It’s not that we don’t have money in mental health,” he con-

tinues. “Those docs are just hard to come by. Those docs are in high demand. The salaries are harder for small communities to come up with, if they can even afford it.”

All of that creates frustration at the community and family levels.


“If (practitioners) have more expense than revenue, they’re not going to stay,” he explains. “We have a tremendous workforce of credentialed professionals with great backgrounds. They are disciplined professionals with a process-mentality.”

While Wyoming might have less money, there’s never enough money to “do it all,” he says.

He is a supporter of telehealth but notes that ensuring access to the availability of high speed internet at the municipal level isn’t a Department of Health challenge even as improving access to healthcare remains an open question. It’s a promising approach and allows Wyoming communities to bring highly-specialized services and care that are otherwise harder to maintain in a rural state.

“We need to examine any existing barriers to growth in the telemedicine’s adoptions so that we make the most of this opportunity,” he explains.

It’s not lost on him that the questions facing Wyoming health care today are pretty much the same as they were 20 years ago. That drives his interest in his on-the-ground learning through his community visits.

“We can’t do what we did in the past, and we’re not sure what to stop doing,” he explains. “How do we really talk together about what our priorities can be and how do we do that with the right amount of resource? And how we do that without scaring people?” 

Have a concern or an idea about healthcare in Wyoming?

Wyoming Department of Health Director Mike Ceballos wants to hear from you.

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**Ceballos asks that email communications and voicemails be succinct so he can absorb and respond to the inquiries and ideas.*