

# Gadbois leads by example

BY NANCY KIRSCH | Contributing Writer

## VOLUNTEERING AS A 13-YEAR-OLD

candy striper set up Christine Gadbois for a lifelong nursing career. Gadbois, who earned her doctorate in nursing practice, among other degrees, held leadership roles with several health care entities before becoming CEO of **CareLink Inc.** in East Providence in 2019.

CareLink is a network of 11 nonprofit partners that collaborate to provide health care to elder adults, including specialized health care for residents in more than 55 nursing facilities statewide.

Gadbois, whose doctoral work focused on getting health care to stigmatized populations, expanded health care access to patients in earlier leadership roles.

“Access to good-quality, wraparound care in the least-restrictive environment benefits everyone,” she said. “Our CareLink members are among Rhode Island’s most well-respected health care providers for seniors ... we can leverage their expertise and resources to be a part of the solution.”

When COVID-19 kept nursing homes closed to outsiders, Gadbois mobilized her team to critically analyze the dental services CareLink has provided since 2008, primarily to nursing home residents who rely on Medicaid. The organization hired additional staff – three dentists and three dental hygienists – and used funds from a Delta Dental grant to purchase more equipment.

“Now we fill cavities and perform simple extractions for patients within their own nursing homes,” Gadbois said. “We used to have to search for community dentists willing to treat Medicaid patients.”

CareLink board President Kevin McKay, who is also CEO and president of Tockwotton on the Waterfront, a nonprofit senior living community in East Providence, said Gadbois worked hard to ensure Tockwotton had personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.



**PATIENT-FOCUSED:** Throughout her various leadership roles, Christine Gadbois, now the CEO of CareLink Inc., has worked to expand health care access to patients. At her initiative, CareLink recently developed a psychiatry consultation program for nursing home and group home residents.

PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

“Chris and her staff were able to get us things we couldn’t find,” he said. “The first to roll up her sleeves and pitch in with nursing when there were staff shortages, Chris also reassigned rehab specialists when little rehab was going on.”

Recognizing how the pandemic-driven isolation impacted nursing home residents, Gadbois received a Rhode Island Foundation grant to create an interactive TV show. It aired last summer and is now available on CareLink’s website.

“These evidence-based interventions provided residents with some stimulation,” said Gadbois, who partnered on the initiative with a University of Michigan nursing school colleague.

At Gadbois’ initiative, CareLink recently developed a psychiatry consultation program for nursing home residents and group home residents, which the organization is working to expand. CareLink is also working to establish a “closed-door pharmacy” to provide nursing home residents their medications less expensively and more efficiently. If the R.I. Board of Pharmacy approves the application, the CareLink pharmacy will lead to cost-savings for nursing homes as well.

“Chris’ clinical background and her public health experience were key for us,” said McKay, a member of the search committee who recruit-

ed, interviewed and hired Gadbois. “The last couple of years have been extremely challenging. We hired a new CEO, moved our headquarters and lost two member companies. During COVID, one nursing home closed, management staff received no raises, we had to furlough some staff, some of whom came back to us, and Chris maintained staff morale. We lost some revenue [yet] CareLink is stronger financially today ... because of Chris’ leadership and the people she’s brought in.”

Gadbois calls her leadership style “participatory and very hands-on,” adding that it’s critical that everyone be involved to make decisions in a democratic fashion. Gadbois works to develop leaders within CareLink, with a budget of approximately \$7 million and nearly 100 employees.

“It’s critical for leaders to trust their abilities and stretch themselves, so I do lots of leading by example,” she said.

A strong proponent of professional development, Gadbois’ board leadership roles include two terms as past president of the Rhode Island State Nurses Association board and is current president of the Rhode Island Public Health Association board. Asked how she so effectively manages multitasking her myriad commitments, Gadbois, a Cumberland native, said, “I don’t ever sit still.” ■

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KEVIN MCKAY, CareLink Inc. board president