

Ask a Leader
Mary Sheridan
November 2013 Roots

Mary Sheridan has been the director of the Idaho SORH for 10 years. Prior to that, she worked as a hospital registered nurse for 14 years before coming to the state to work its poison control office in 1995.

You've been a long-time director of a small SORH. What are the challenges?

We are all really highly focused on customer service--someone answers the phones here 8-5:00, M-F. We try to make sure our phones never go to voicemail. If someone is on the phone, the call rolls down to another staffer. It's really rare that someone would call and no one would pick up the phone. When there's a conference and we're all there, we've sometimes set it to go to someone's cell phone and they can answer it there. All our staff supports that and it's important to everybody here.

The other challenge with having a small staff is that everyone has so much to do. I worry sometimes that I'm asking people to do too much. I don't worry so much about myself--but I worry about the people around me. And there's the capacity issue. Our office has two SORH FTEs, including me, plus one PCO FTE, a part-time temporary position, and an administrative assistant, responsible for six federal grants and state programs. We have to ask ourselves if we can we add one more project or one more grant and do it well. For example, there recently was a dental health workforce federal grant opportunity--95% of Idaho is a designated HPSA in dental health. Although I hoped to apply, my supervisor said "you need an FTE for that and one doesn't currently exist." So there's always that question of how many more things can you take on and do well.

What are the benefits?

You get to learn so much about so many different things. I think of it sometimes as getting to be both a generalist and an expert. Maybe your work is focused on the SHIP and SORH grants, but you also have a hand in 3Rnet, or you get to learn about HPSA data collection. When someone in the office is out and you answer their phone, you have the opportunity to answer a question that might be outside your typical job responsibilities. You get to develop new areas of expertise--you're working to the top of your game, taking new challenges, looking for opportunities for new projects. If you worked in a bigger office and your job was exclusively Flex, you may not get to learn all these other things. And we get to really know each other and our stakeholders. We take a few minutes (every day) to check in with each, on a personal level. If someone is working way too hard, I can say, "Why don't you get out of here for awhile?" I think people appreciate that.

What in your background has allowed you to meet these challenges? And how do you foster flexibility in your staff?

Because we're small, we communicate on so many levels, and people can see the value and importance of what they do. That's critical to our success. Everyone here is so important and so

valued--and we appreciate each other so much. It's so great to know that someone else is answering my phone. It's great to know that we have that camaraderie.

One of the things that has helped me is going out into rural Idaho and meeting stakeholders, going into clinics, meeting staff, seeing their challenges and making sure our grants are aligned with their needs. That looking, asking, listening and caring, and coming back to see what you can do to help--I can see some alignment there with having been an intensive care nurse. It takes a level of empathy and compassion.

I love my job--I love the interactions. It is the perfect match for me. I'm really lucky.