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## OUTLOOK OPTIMISTIC

An executive profile of Cascadia's President and Chief Executive Officer

By *David Austin*  
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Leslie Ford, the president and chief executive of Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare, is a self-described "State Department brat."

As a youth, she traveled to Malta, England, Germany, France, among other places. Her father was with the diplomatic corps, so she was able to see plenty of the world at an early age.

But after her college years, she had a notion that the Pacific Northwest held her destiny. Her motivation? The area had more glaciated peaks within commuting distance than anywhere else she could find.

"White-water rafting, mountain climbing, hiking. All the gravity sports," Ford said. "Anything outdoors was for me."

She came to Portland in 1985 and began working for mental health agencies, including Network Behavioral HealthCare. In 2002, her agency joined forces with two others -- Mt. Hood Community Mental Health and Unity -- to form Cascadia. Cascadia now serves roughly 21,000 patients each year.

Ford's agency operates with a \$38 million annual budget, but those numbers probably will change with voter rejection of the Measure 30 income tax measure earlier this month.

The measure would have helped fund schools, jails and social services. Instead, agencies such as Cascadia will have to cut some programs that help house and treat mental health patients.

Ford, 49, lives in Southeast Portland with her husband, Loren Ford, a community college professor; their 16-year-old son; and 9-year-old twins. In their spare time, Ford and her family tend to the needs of a house full of pets, including a hedgehog.

- **Do you think voters understand how the failure of Measure 30 will affect Multnomah County residents when it comes to the care of mental health patients?**

You'd think that people would learn that at some point, you do pay for it. Only what will happen now is that we'll pay much more later on down the road. The patients, these aren't folks who just go away and sit in a corner somewhere suffering silently. The downstream costs are going to accumulate and the financial toll could be huge.

- **What's going to happen? Is it accurate to say that the future of mental health care is at stake? Or is it a case of providers saying, 'The sky is falling'?**

It's too soon to tell. We know there'll be repercussions but (state officials) haven't been really specific about what's going to happen with funding. I think the worst-case scenario is that Oregon Health Plan outpatient care is going to be hit hard.

- **Do you think people in the metropolitan area have a clear idea how many people are affected by mental illness? Or are we blind to it?**

Most people with serious mental health problems don't tend to be on the streets in downtown Lake Oswego or Beaverton. You find them downtown, where they're very easily dismissed. I think people are feeling insulated from what the lives are like for people who are poor and have mental disabilities.

- **How do you change that?**

I feel like this last year we, as a field, made some pretty big steps forward in helping people understand these disorders. During the last legislative session it was pretty amazing. I didn't feel like we had to convince anyone that there was a crisis out there.

But it gets hard in this climate to let people know that things are working. I think people in Oregon and even Multnomah County are so gun shy and tax weary that there's a knee-jerk reaction that is completely disconnected from the action and the act. If they don't see something immediate, it's that we're wasting taxpayer's money. It's not that simple.

- **How hard is your job right now?**

Lately, it's just been one thing after another. I'm having to move on things a lot faster and more quickly under these circumstances. But I don't necessarily see it as bad that things get pushed along at a faster pace. Sometimes that can be a good thing.

- **Can the local mental health system be more efficient?**

Of course. It's not like we're perfect and we don't ever make mistakes. Like a regular business, we have to look at what we do and find ways to make things work better. But I always get uneasy when I hear someone say that we're not spending taxpayer's money wisely. In my position, I have a pretty good view of a lot of different layers and I sure don't see any wasting of money. It's not like we're taking a lot of expensive trips or going on retreats.

- **How do you stay excited about your job given the current financial landscape? And how would you describe yourself as an administrator?**

I'm a delusional optimist. Things have to get better. I feel like we have an incredible responsibility to keep the boat intact for folks who still are receiving services. I stay excited because I think we'll grow (the system) back when things change economically. Right now, we have to hold on to the skeleton of what I believe is a really good service system.

I also work with some really cool people, so it makes my job easier.

- **Do you really have a hedgehog as a pet?**

Actually, it's an albino hedgehog. We also have two leopard geckos, five rats, a dog and a cat. Throw in three kids and a husband and it really is a zoo.