

# Personalized Attention

Behavioral Health Systems creates managed health and substance abuse programs for business.

By Niki Sepsas

**undoubtedly,** the first thing that a visitor notices upon entering the offices of Behavioral Health Systems (BHS) is that there are three receptionists answering the telephones. What would appear to some business analysts as “over-staffing” is just the opposite in the mind of Deborah Stephens, the founder, chairman, and CEO of BHS.

“I want every single phone call to this office answered by a live voice,” Stephens relates. “You won’t phone here and wait to be routed through a phone tree. One of our receptionists will put you in touch with the designated employee handling the question you have.”

That focus on personalized attention has been the hallmark of Stephens’ management philosophy since the Iowa native opened the doors to BHS in Birmingham in 1989. A privately held Alabama corporation, BHS reflects the founding efforts of Stephens supported by a successful group of individual investors representing business and industry across the state.

Stephens broke new ground in 1989 when she introduced the concept of creating and administering a national specialty preferred provider organization (PPO). Her vision of a PPO administering the mental health/substance abuse and employee assistance benefits for self-insured employers nationwide had not yet become widely accepted in the industry. While the “managed care” concept was still in its infancy, health plan costs were rising dramatically. Feeling that the new HMOs and PPOs would become the wave of the future, Stephens convinced her team of investors that the business practices and philosophies she proposed to introduce with BHS would become the accepted norm.

Stephens was right. Today, those

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practices are considered the hallmark of successful managed health/substance abuse (MHSA) companies.

“Approximately seventy percent of the business nationally is handled by about five companies,” she points out. “We’re one of the fifteenth largest MHSA companies in the U.S. and the first to introduce nationally a ‘fee for service’ approach where an employer pays only for services rendered, rather than the standard capitation system. Today, almost all the large competitors offer a ‘fee for service’ product. I was very fortunate at the beginning to have attracted a group of savvy investors.”

They were obviously very impressed with the twenty years of experience in healthcare finance and administration that Stephens brought with her. She had formerly served as executive vice-president and COO of both a 100-bed hospital and its parent company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She had also achieved national recognition in the areas of multi-corporate planning and reorganization, zero-base budgeting, and physical rehabilitation finance.

In 1984, she was cited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals as one of eleven women nationally to hold a V.P. or higher status in the hospital field. *Entrepreneur* magazine listed her as one of the top seventy-eight entrepreneurs in the nation. In between, she found time

to serve on the advisory committee to the Department of Health and Human Services on healthcare prospective payment issues.

“I was drawn to Birmingham because of its reputation as a leading center of healthcare services,” Stephens explains. “What led me to launch BHS was the realization that something like this was needed.”

In November 2003, BHS realigned itself with a dream team of the most prominent institutional and individual investors in Birmingham.

BHS seeks to provide comprehensive behavioral health services to employee and their beneficiaries which are high quality, cost-effective, uniformly accessible, and managed with a least restrictive treatment approach. Employers’ medical benefits costs are reduced through access to negotiated provider rates, expert problem identification and treatment planning, referral to optional treatment settings, and continuous care management. The development of a comprehensive benefit plan and continuum of care network ensures that every beneficiary has access to comprehensive behavioral health benefits and resources. BHS continues to focus on building and maintaining an exclusive network of providers representing a complete range of treatment settings and specialties across a broad geographic area.

Stephens has assembled her own “dream team” of employees to administer the programs of BHS. Dr. William Patterson, the company’s medical director for the past fifteen years, is a nationally prominent, Board-certified psychiatrist with more than thirty years experience in teaching patient care, research, and medical administration. Of BHS’ staff of approximately eighty full-time individuals, fully one-third are clinicians in the mental health field. Each



is masters' prepared with a minimum of five years direct care experience.

Rather than the "call center" approach used by other behavioral health competitors, clinicians at BHS are individually assigned on an employer-specific basis to assist their employees. "This ensures that their beneficiaries will be speaking to a clinician who has a thorough understanding of the custom-tailored programs of each of our clients," Stephens points out.

That approach has been successful. BHS has notched an impressive ninety-two percent employer-client retention rate since its inception in 1989. It has also led to superior client cost savings at fifty to seventy percent below national cost averages. Since its inception, BHS has produced savings in excess of \$20 million for its clients while greatly expanding their benefit plans. BHS also enjoys a ninety-six percent patient satisfaction rate since 1994 with a measurement system cited as superior to its national peers. The company currently ranks as the fourteenth largest MHSA provider in the U.S.

BHS today provides managed behavioral healthcare services through an 8,200+ preferred provider network to more than 462 client companies covering upwards of 375,000 people. The company has been endorsed by several national business coalitions as their preferred behavioral health provider.

Anyone who meets Deborah Stephens becomes instantly aware of the passion she has for her work. Her flashing eyes, toothpaste-commercial smile, and unbridled enthusiasm underscore the pride she has in her company, her staff, and their commitment to providing BHS' clients unparalleled customer service and individualized attention. "If you don't believe wholeheartedly in what you're doing, you can't expect some-



one else to believe in it," she smiles.

From a start-up in 1989 to a \$13 million company in the top percentage of its class today, BHS is poised for continued growth and even greater success in the future. Looking forward to 2007, BHS has already executed contracts for 140,000 addi-

tional persons across the nation.

"I'd like to see us become one of the top ten providers in the U.S. in the next three to five years," Stephens reflects. "But regardless of how large we become, our phones will still be answered by live receptionists." 