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## Complex job will require a careful search

BY FRED MANN  
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Giving away money isn't as easy as it sounds.

"You spend 95 percent of your time saying 'No,' " said Bob Ottenhoff, president and chief executive of GuideStar, which operates an online database of all tax-exempt nonprofit organizations in the nation.

So, besides a thick skin, the head of any philanthropic organization also needs to have focus, vision and courage, according to Ottenhoff and other experts on charitable foundations.

Finding those qualities in one person isn't easy, they say.

That's why the Kansas Health Foundation's board of directors will have its work cut out when members begin a national search for a new president to replace Marni Vliet, who resigned last week.

Vliet, who earned roughly \$370,000, including benefits, according to the most recent federal tax information available on the organization, intends to start her own consulting firm. She had served as the foundation's president and chief executive since 1996.

The board plans to take its time with the search, said Ron Holt, board chairman and assistant Sedgwick County manager. Members need to discuss the foundation's future before putting together a profile of what they want in a new president, he said.

It could be two or three months before the board launches a national search, Holt said.

"We're not going to be in a big hurry. We have an extraordinarily capable staff at every level, so it gives us the opportunity to have a conversation among ourselves and decide a process for developing that profile and then starting the search process," he said.

"We've got a tough job to do, and we're going to take our time."

The foundation is a private philanthropy with assets of \$490 million. It started in 1985 with \$200 million from the sale of Wesley Medical Center to Hospital Corporation of America.

It allocates about \$23 million annually in areas of children's health, public health, health policy and leadership.

The Council on Foundations in Washington, D.C., and the New York-based Foundation Center list it as the largest philanthropy in Kansas in assets and total giving.

### A test for the board

Choosing a new president for a foundation is a test of the foundation's board of directors, said Stacy Palmer, editor of the Chronicle of Philanthropy in Washington, D.C.

"The real job for the board is to figure out what kind of person it needs and define the job well," she said. "This is a really important time to set the direction for the organization."

Vliet's resignation took effect immediately. The foundation will be led on an interim basis by Don Stewart, former president and chief executive of Wesley Medical Center, and former vice president and senior advisor at the foundation who has been serving as a consultant to the foundation in retirement.

Stewart said the attractiveness of the position and the reputation of the foundation will likely make it easy to find candidates.

He also said the board will probably use a search firm that will force it to be specific about the kind of person it wants.

"They make you go through a pretty rigorous process," he said.

Stewart said that in the interim he will continue the foundation's current mission: to improve the health of all Kansans.

"We are always identifying ways to be better grant-makers, and we'll continue to do that," he said.

Even though \$490 million sounds like a lot of money, the need far outstrips the resources of any health foundation,

Ottenhoff said.

So foundations need leaders who are able find a niche and focus on just a few health-related fields.

"If you're trying to catch all the jackrabbits, most likely you're not going to catch any of them," he said.

Leaders today also have to be able to ensure that their grants are having maximum impact, he said. A trend at foundations these days is a growing concern among investors about whether their money is being well spent.

A good candidate also has to be able to recognize the power and potential of the other nonprofits that are working in the community and state, and the enormous energy all of them can harness for health-related fields, he said.

### **Important for Kansas**

Billie G. Hall, president and chief executive of the Sunflower Foundation in Topeka, said the president of the Kansas Health Foundation is important to the other health foundations in the state because they all network with each other. And the Kansas Health Foundation has largely defined the landscape, she said.

"Each foundation has its own niche and its own focus," Hall said. "The Kansas Health Foundation has done really well identifying priorities and the programs that fit those priorities."

Under Vliet, the foundation focused on children's health issues. It also created the Kansas Health Institute to provide objective health information to policymakers, and formed the Kansas Leadership Center to develop leaders for communities, institutions and organizations.

### **What a leader needs**

Hall said a new president has to understand what it means to lead an organization that's dedicated to improving people's health.

"You've got to have someone who has a sense of that, a passion and a vision. Marni clearly had that," she said.

"It's not just the mission, it's the flavor of the organization, as well," said Perry Schuckman, executive director of the Nonprofit Chamber of Service, a membership organization comprising over 150 local nonprofits. "Finding somebody who can really step into the overall feel of an organization is a difficult thing."

Finally, the candidate for a philanthropy has to dare to take risks, experts said.

"One of the best things a foundation can do is act as an inspiration, as a catalyst, for really putting in the risk money that the government or even the private sector can't," Ottenhoff said.

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