

MARKETPLACE



ON THE RECORD | DEBORAH STEPHENS, CEO OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

'I believe we have yet to experience the real impact of the current economic situation. I am hopeful that we will not begin to approach the devastation of the Great Depression.'

By ROY L. WILLIAMS
News staff writer

In 1989, Deborah L. Stephens gave up a job as a hospital executive in Milwaukee to pursue a dream of running her own business.

Nearly two decades later, Stephens has built Birmingham's Behavioral Health Systems into a firm that provides outplacement and employee assistance services to more than 500 companies across the country.

Stephens, who was once featured in an *Entrepreneur* magazine cover story about people who built multimillion-dollar enterprises from scratch, says today's economic downturn has more companies turning to Behavioral Health for assistance in helping stressed-out workers cope with a crisis some have begun comparing to the Great Depression.

She shares her views of how the current economy is affecting companies and employees.

Q. Give me your take on how this downturn is affecting companies Behavioral Health works with?

A. A lot of our clients' businesses are booming, with expansions and hiring occurring rather than downsizing. However, for those companies that do have to lay off employees, we observe the highest degree of concern for those employees' well-being and for their job search efforts.

However, I believe we have yet to experience the real impact of the current economic situation. I am hopeful that we will not begin to approach the devastation of the Great Depression, where unemployment rates reached 33 percent.



Q. *Is it fair for the current financial crisis to be compared to the Great Depression?*

A. There are some aspects that are bothersome in their similarity to our current economic condition. For instance, it originated in the U.S., with most historians agreeing that it began on the day of the stock market crash of 1929 (Oct. 29 of that year, known as "Black Tuesday").

Also, debt was seen as one of the causes of the Great Depression. Credit had been ample and readily available at cheap rates. Consumer and commercial debt was high when price deflation occurred and demand decreased.

This caused massive defaults and banking failures, which led to curtailments of construction and capital investments. The downward spiral escalated, which turned a recession into a depression.

Compounding these problems was the occurrence of a severe drought which ravaged the heartland of America and decimated the farming industry. Massive layoffs occurred.

Some cite the failure of the government to rescue the banks, some blamed the Federal Reserve for poor policy-making in allowing the money supply to shrink, while yet others, including President Roosevelt, blamed the excesses of big business for causing an unstable and inequitable distribution of wealth.

There are just too many similarities between the causes of the Great Depression to our current situation, for comfort. I, and others I speak to, feel we are at a point where the right decisions need to be made, and now.

Q. *Have you seen increased demand for your employee assistance programs at the companies you work with?*

A. Absolutely. Over the 20 years we've been in business, we've seen our EAP outpatient usage go from an average of 6 percent to over 11 percent currently.

Some company's rates are as high as 18 percent. This means that a company with 2,500 beneficiaries could see up to 180 people call for assistance.

We are seeing increased requests for financial and legal referrals, as well as

DEBORAH STEPHENS

► **Title:** Founder, chairman and chief executive.

► **Hometown:** Born in Newton, Iowa; moved to Germany in 1963, when father started Maytag's first European division; lived in Milwaukee, Wis., before moving to Birmingham in 1988.

► **Education:** bachelor's degree in finance; University of Iowa

► **Work history:** Served as chief operating officer of a 100-bed hospital and its parent company in Milwaukee before founding Behavioral Health Systems in 1989.

► **Favorite book:** "A Prayer for Owen Meanie" by John Irving and anything by Norman Mailer.

► **About Behavioral Health:** Provides managed health services, outplacement and counseling for employees of 500 companies across the country. Has more than 80 employees.

stress and marital issues. In addition, our education and training division, which has been in existence for over a decade, is receiving requests daily for group training and in-services that address financial and work-life issues.

Q. *Can the current daily deluge of bad economic news have a negative affect on people psychologically?*

A. Many people are personally affected right now with the market instability. We've seen this in the past with both 9/11 and the subsequent wars.

It is possible to become so engrossed in media coverage, to the exclusion of other activities, that the whole world seems negative. People that are prone to depression are particularly susceptible.

And it isn't just the psychological toll. The stress of bad news is affecting people's wellness. Acute stress after the 9/11 attacks was associated with a 53 percent increase in cardiovascular ailments.

We've seen many companies who want to go the extra mile for employees now — providing additional financial assistance counseling, elder-care assistance, help with work-life issues, flexible hours, four-day work weeks, all in an effort to minimize stress on the employee.

Q. *What led you into this type of work?*

A. After almost 20 years in health care administration, I saw an opportunity to provide managed care services, the first of its kind to be based in the Southeast as of 1989. I created a preferred provider organization and a program to administer the mental health/substance abuse benefits for self-insured employers nationwide.

Q. *How do you relax away from work?*

A. Being with friends, reading, weight training, going on jaunts to Chicago with my family, and spending time with my two much-loved and very spoiled dogs.

I have a champion Tibetan terrier, Bogart, and a Bichon Frise named Angelina. Bogart has been on a tour of national dog shows with his handler.

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