

personality profile •

Stonikas' cause on the dashboard

Debra Stonikas

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By Eric Woods, Correspondent

Debra Stonikas was born at Camp Legeune, North Carolina, where her father served as a United States Marine. She grew up in the Chicago area, received her bachelor's degree in business administration from Indiana University, and her M.B.A. from DePaul University in Chicago. Stonikas is married to Bill and has four children; Joe, Pete, Anne-Marie, and James. She enjoys family activities such as basketball tournaments and college game days and taking walks during the fall weather. Stonikas previously worked in the banking industry in a variety of analyst and managerial roles, including serving as the chief information officer of a regional correspondent bank. "I was fortunate to be part of the many technological transformations that have shaped the banking industry today, including check imaging, internet banking, knowledge management systems and online dashboards," she said. "Strategy implementation and performance measurement became key areas of interest, and I decided to pursue advanced training on these topics." One highlight for Stonikas was spending a week in London in 2009, training alongside the International Red Cross and PromoMadrid. Consulting in these realms led her to M.E.R.C.Y. Communities in March, 2011.

Nature of the business: M.E.R.C.Y. Communities is a non-profit agency which provides housing and supportive services to homeless and at-risk families. Recently, Stonikas assisted with the in-house implementation of the new Agency Dashboard. "At the operational level, the Dashboard provides a snapshot of each client, including how they are progressing, their performance trends, and the type and amount of services rendered," she said. Case workers use their dashboards to make decisions as to referral services needed as well as to coach clients.

How is business?: "Through all of the high-tech transformation, M.E.R.C.Y. hasn't lost its high-touch," said Stonikas. "Every tool we have implemented has helped us do a better job in delivering our mission." Stonikas also feels the use of intelligent tools has created greater visibility into client needs so that the organization can better target appropriate programs by which to serve them.

Trends: Paper record-keeping had become rampant and burdensome, and Stonikas has looked to reduce that. "Six months ago, it took an hour and a half and six pieces of paper to record a staff member's time for the week," she said. "In addition, it took reams of paper to document client case notes, not to mention the elaborate filing systems and security surrounding them." Today, both time sheets and case management are handled on-line.

Challenges: Initially, Stonikas' challenge was getting up to speed on the day-to-day language of human services. "Acronyms are used in reference to funding sources and in identifying other agencies, which can be confusing to a newcomer," she said. Another challenge was determining performance across the organization. "For example, are the clients progressing in their quest toward self-sufficiency/stabilization? What services are the case managers delivering on a daily basis? What is our percentage occupancy for the week?"

Of what accomplishments are you most proud?: "I am really a forward-looking person, so past accomplishments seem like small stepping stones to where I am today," said Stonikas.

What makes M.E.R.C.Y. Communities stand out?: M.E.R.C.Y. has served the Sangamon County community for 12 years. "Our keys to success are a highly committed and skilled staff, a dedicated board of directors, and a strong balance sheet." According to Stonikas, the organization's mission will not change but the delivery however, is being enhanced by applying business principles to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

What's next for you?: Stonikas is currently writing a book on the role of dashboards in non-profit management. "My hope is that a practical hands-on guide will help other social agencies learn business techniques that can enhance the delivery and communication of their social mission and impact," she said.

Eric Woods is a freelance writer from Springfield.

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