

By Warren Wolfe, Star Tribune

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When Mary Ann Blade walked through the door 20 years ago to lead the Minnesota Visiting Nurse Agency, the public health nonprofit was on the verge of collapse.

"We had a small office in an old building, and our finances were in bad shape," said Blade, who retires this week as CEO. "Government support was dropping, HMOs were taking many of our home-care patients, and we were crumbling."

What changed, she said, was "building much stronger partnerships, helping staff [who often had to buy their own supplies] and really digging in" to provide leadership.

The result: an annual budget that has grown from \$3 million to \$25 million now, and a public health service with a national reputation.

The agency still is grounded in home health care visits to poor sick people, an effort started with its formation in 1902. But it is best known for offering flu shots around the state, begun in 1994 and now the largest such program the country.

While its Minneapolis and Hennepin County funding has stayed roughly level over the past 20 years -- about \$2.4 million a year -- the agency has broadened its support. One source is Club 100,

started in 2000 with 100 women donating items for low-income families, and now numbering 2,700 members.

"People are wonderful," Blade said. "They see a need and an opportunity to help, and they just step up."

Her replacement, Jen Van Liew, CEO of a similar agency in Des Moines, starts on Monday.

Blade, 66, already knows what's next for her. After time off "to decompress" with her husband, Richard, she intends to write two books. One will be to help others tackle the issues of managing nonprofits.

The other will be about her mother, Leiron Suszylo, to help her own children know the woman who died in 1994 after changing dramatically with dementia. "My kids were kind of afraid of her, never really knowing who Mom had been," Blade said. "I want to reintroduce her to them -- and maybe help other families with that issue."

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