

Jessica Maurer:

We need to stop thinking that aging is a problem and start thinking that older people are a really critical, important part of Maine's future.

Announcer:

Ahead on Tim Talk, there's a silver lining to Maine's aging population for those with the courage to start changing the conversation about growing older and working.

Tim Dentry:

Welcome one and all to Tim talk. I'm Tim Dentry, CEO of Northern Light Health, and I'm so glad you're joining us today. This season of Tim Talk, our fifth spends time trying to understand and learn from characteristics of today's community and their impact on healthcare challenges. This episode looks at the value of our workforce from an aging perspective. The pandemic taught us many things the hard way, but I will cite two. Patients' health status is intimately impacted by all forms of bias, be they gaps in poverty, housing, transportation, food security, social inclusion, workforce, community development. Many of the things we've talked about on these podcasts. All of which impact hands-on care across all settings.

The second thing that that nasty pandemic reminded us was how fragile our workforce is under regular conditions, but definitely under such stressful situations. And that sense of fragility can be even higher when you depend so much on a workforce that is aging. All of us are. With a strong but thin bench of younger next-generation healthcare workers coming up. But there is power in aging. That is more than a catchphrase. It's a movement here in Maine that we are going to talk about with my two honored guests. Jessica Maurer, executive director of the Maine Council on Aging. And Catharine MacLaren, vice president of talent and diversity for Northern Light Health. Welcome to you both.

Jessica Maurer:

Thanks for having us.

Catharine MacLaren:

Yes, thanks very much.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. And first, so that our listeners can understand a little bit more about each of you, would you each take a moment to share a little bit of your background and why you have chosen your mission to include concern and support for older people? Jess, may we start with you?

Jessica Maurer:

Sure. Sure. Thank you. I would say that I, from the time I was very young, my goal really was to help people or to make life better for folks. And so many, many people would laugh out loud to say so I became a lawyer. And I worked for of the Attorney General for 17 years and found in the last seven years I was there, I was doing public policy for the attorney general at that point and said, "Wow. This is a really cool thing to do, is to start to make things better for people by really thinking about how do we change systems, how do we change institutions, how do we change the way we think." And so I got really bitten by the public policy bug and started looking for what made sense for me and found a job working on aging policy issues. And I said, "Well, that sounds like really a great thing to talk about."

And I found out, which I didn't know at the time, that it's just a perfect opportunity to talk about a lot of systems change that's needed to make sure that we can all ... Which is our catchphrase for the Maine Council on Aging. We can all live healthy, engaged, secure lives as we age in our homes and in our

communities. And as you said, we're all aging. So this is something from the time we're born until the time we die, I like to say we can all agree that we want to live our very best lives right up until the very end. And so that's really the basic work that we do. And I feel lucky every day that I get to come to work and try to make things better for folks, which is still what I want to do.

Tim Dentry:

Wonderful. Thank you so much for that. Catharine, please, same question.

Catharine MacLaren:

Sure. Yeah. Well, I was very close with my grandmother and have also been interested in helping. And I will say I actually almost became a lawyer and then I decided to become a social worker instead. And by virtue of some of that work, I was able to do some research specifically related to aging in place and helping people be able to, as Jess is talking about, be able to live healthy engaged lives for however long that is. And became really interested in this topic. And then as a realist, I live in Maine where we are perhaps the oldest state in the country. Is that a fair statement? And I oversee recruitment and a lot of workforce issues. And so it's relevant for us in terms of our current workforce and the workforce that we are looking to attract, train, retain, et cetera. So checks all those boxes for me.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. Thank you Catharine and thank you, Jess. So let's get into the heart of this. Jessica. Why is it so important that we start thinking differently and talking differently about our workforce that is getting older?

Jessica Maurer:

I'm going to just actually pivot right back to something that Catharine just said, which is that we're the oldest state in the country by median age. And I'm going to say it's a safe bet that when we say that we think that's a bad thing. And I say we're winning. We actually have an incredibly healthy population of older people who are engaged in every sector of our economy. And we have to start to think differently. I think this is the other piece. When we say we have the oldest population by median age ... If we have having a webinar, I have this great image of a cartoonist who's got the gray wave or the silver tsunami if you've ever heard of those things. But it's literally a wave of medically needy, sedentary older people that are about to crash down on two young kids. And so this is what this evokes when we say we're the oldest. We don't say that in a good way. We say it in a very bad way. We're the oldest state. Means that there's going to be a lot of problems, there's going to be a lot of concerns.

And what we don't talk about is the second part of that, which is that we humans are experiencing an unprecedented longevity. We've never seen it before. And at the exact same time, we are experiencing worldwide a population collapse. So people aren't having as many kids. And Lancet says by 2024 ... This is a published report literally a year ago in March that says 75%, 75% of countries by 2050 will be at or below replacement population rate. So that means replacing both parents. So we have fewer babies being born worldwide, but certainly in Maine.

And more than a decade, 12 years ago, I was in a room with Charlie Colgan, our former state economist. Who said if we had put an ankle bracelet on every baby born since 1980, such that child had not been able to leave the state, we would have the same problem that we have. We just haven't had enough babies. And that isn't a problem with Maine, it's not a problem with America. It's a problem worldwide, but it's really not a problem to be solved because we also had this new longevity. One of the things we're talking about is that we have to get rid of our 1950s view of work and aging. We need to stop thinking that aging is a problem and start thinking that older people are a really critical, important part of Maine's future.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. And so true and so beautifully stated. I love the attitude of we're winning as it relates to older people. And being one myself, I like older people. And it is a positive and is a thing we need to keep in front of us and make sure we're working hard for them on their behalf. Speaking of which, let's put it in the context of employment. What do you hear from older workers who are looking for jobs or contemplating when they can slow down and step back from a job? We have so many individuals that work at Northern Light that ... Healthcare is not easy. It's physically demanding in many, many situations. What are you hearing from the older workers? What experience are they having? Do they face stereotypes?

Jessica Maurer:

Constantly they face stereotypes. And it runs the gamut of what we're hearing. We hear from 40 and 50 year olds who leave the workforce to take care of or go part-time to have to reduce their hours to take care of an aging parent, even an aging spouse, and that they cannot get back into the workforce. They can't get back in at the same level they were in, at the same income that they were in. They might not even be able to get interviews for jobs that they'd already done. After they have significant experience for. And on the flip side, I'll just say, we talk to employers all over Maine and there's very seldom a time when we don't have a conversation with an employer where it's surfaced that they are making assumptions about older workers in some way, shape or form that is in fact making it harder for older people to come back into the workforce.

And then for folks who are in the workforce, we hear really consistently that feeling of being pushed out. It is the assumption that people are going to leave. And it's an assumption. It's a stereotype. The 1950s view. We are still to this day thinking we're going to retire at 65 and we haven't shifted this view that we have to work longer with more breaks. And so we haven't created ... And 2020, COVID really made us create some level of flexibility. But we really haven't figured out how to do that systemically within our institutions to make it easier for people to work longer with more flexibility. Because what we need to be doing is talking to every single worker every year saying, what do you like? What don't you like? Where do you want to go? Do you want to step back? We don't have any way for folks to step back. And so you've got a lot of people who aren't ready to retire, but they've been hearing for the last 10 or 15 years, when are you going to retire? When are you going to retire? They hate that, by the way. We hear that all the time. That's something we should really erase from our culture is asking people when they're going to retire. And that they would work longer.

As a matter of fact, I'll tell a story. You like stories. I have a friend who retired at 65 and she told me it would've been better for me from my retirement benefits to retire at 66, but I just couldn't take it anymore. And so I said to this person who was top of her game. Said, "So if you could have stopped managing people and stopped having to write grant reports and things like that, would you have stayed for another year?" And she said, "100%." So we invest all of this time and energy and money into people and they are at the top of their game and they leave because they are doing stuff they don't like to do and they can. But they really want to keep working. As you just said, we have not a very strong bench. So we let them go.

We don't really have a plan for what we're going to do to infill this incredible experience that's just walked out the door. And so we hear also this self-fulfilling prophecy. Because we think people are going to leave we stop investing in the education of older workers. So we're going to prioritize sending a 40 or 45-year-old who's definitely going to be here for another 15 or 20 years ... By the way, that's just not true. There's no definite about that. But we think that person's invested in this organization, we're going to send them to the two-week specialized training. We're not going to send the 65-year-old. And so the 65-year-old is no longer cutting edge. Well, of course they're no longer cutting edge because we're no longer investing in them being cutting edge.

Then finally we hear I would continue to work, if I could just do a different job. Because I'm a supervisor and I don't want supervise anymore, but I want to go over here. I want to train, I want to teach. I just want to be a nurse, by the way. I just want to do this part of nursing. And we haven't created that opportunity for people, and that's where we need to go. It's not just us at Northern Lights, not just us in Maine. As as a how we work is going to have to shift just generally because we're the leading edge of this population change in the country, but it's coming to a state near you. That's what I like to say.

Tim Dentry:

Very good. I think you beautifully portrayed what ageism looks like, feels like in the workplace. The kinds of experiences you hear about. What are ways in which you believe we could address this, like our listeners. What can they be doing on a regular basis? So it'll help with the bigger picture systemically, but what can the individuals do?

Catharine MacLaren:

Sure. I think it's everything from paying attention to the language that we use in our job postings and our recruitment materials and our job descriptions. And also, I'm struck by something that Jess said that I think is really important as opposed to one, are you retiring? The question that we ask employees, and to my mind this should be consistent, is where do you see yourself in a couple of years? What do you see yourself doing? Which is the much more open-ended question. Some people may want to retire. It is my understanding ... Don't quote me on the statistics, but I think 30 years ago there were maybe 10 or 12% of people who thought they would work past 65, and now it's closer to 50% plus. And we could talk about why that is.

There may be some people who feel compelled to work for some reasons, but there are also many people ... And I have lots of anecdotes, which I will spare you. But having conversations with people around 65 who say, "I just don't feel done. There are other things I want to do." And to Jess's point, so on the one hand when we look at the workforce, we often say people are aspiring to get to whatever that next step is. That next step is that next step is, and then you get to wherever you get and then you're supposed to be done. And that it isn't realistic given our expanding lifespans and also our different interests. I think it's such a good point. Sometimes people are really in the space where they want to be leaders and leading is fascinating and wonderful and challenging. And then sometimes you don't want to do that. And that's true for anyone at any age.

So I think meeting people where they are and really respecting and valuing what people are bringing to the table instead of making assumptions about what someone's capacity or willingness is and understanding that there is no research that I'm aware of that indicates that people want to stop growing and developing. And yet there's plenty of evidence that shows us that to Jess's point, we stopped doing that for tenured employees or for older employees. And we really start focusing more on people who are younger or newer to the organization.

Tim Dentry:

So in a second, I'm going to ask you Jess any thoughts or reflections on what Catharine just said. But first let me ask you a follow-up question, Catharine. And that is, Jess had made a really good point of we haven't as a society ... Let's just put it in very, very broad terms. But haven't really figured out how with people working longer, as you say, maybe that there is a role, but the role might be a little different and stepping back might be one way to put it, or maybe less demanding in some ways or taking advantage of their wisdom in a better way than others. So what's your thought on longer-term employees and how with those great colleagues and their commitment and their skills and talents that we could continue that career path and that it doesn't hit a wall. Can you think of any examples where we are trying to give people different opportunities to contribute?

Catharine MacLaren:

Sure. So I would say to me, the first thing that comes up is having flexibility around how we get our work done. And I think healthcare, along with a lot of other industries, healthcare has often had this is what we do and these are the shifts that we offer, and this is the work that we do. And it's all in the service of trying to care for our patients, of course, which is paramount. But that flexibility around is there another way that we could do this that would allow us to really harness and leverage the power of older workers and all our workers? Again, is really interesting.

I will say ... I won't say that this is specific to older workers, it isn't. But in some of our entities, we do have people who go somewhere else for the winter and they come back during the summer and we employ them during that time because it works for them and it's a win for everyone. Those are the types of things. For the most part, most people want meaningful work where they feel like they're doing something impactful, they want some flexibility, and there may be people who are considering shifting in the workforce and there can be phases around that and phased retirement. It doesn't have to be an all or none situation. And I think the institutional knowledge and the industry knowledge and the life knowledge that we can again use and pass on is really tremendous.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. Your thoughts, Jess?

Jessica Maurer:

Oh, yeah. All of the things Catharine said and more. I was going to say, so much of this is about intentionality. That's what we talk about when we talk about ageism. It's being intentional. That we actually have internal stereotypes and assumptions about older people, about ourselves as older people. I was going to say the question you had asked Catharine to start with, we have internalized ageism and we have it big time. And you think about ... We talked about this before. You can't teach an old dog a new trick. That is something we have all heard our entire lives. I've had lots of dogs and I can promise you that you can. But I could tell you story after story after story about how that's not true and that we are in fact as humans, lifelong learners. And I think something else Catharine said that really I wanted to make sure we put a pin in is that purpose is literally the driving force in making sure we live healthy lives.

We actually live with a good attitude about aging personally, a good attitude about aging. We live seven and a half years longer with fewer chronic conditions, better brain health, less anxiety and depression, and we actually heal faster from a serious illness if we live with age positive views. And one of the keys to those things happening is actually having purpose. And so thinking about how you're a healthcare organization. So we should be thinking about how do we really help people who are in our employ understand that? So that we want you to stay. And if you can't work nights and weekends anymore ... Or by the way, there's any number of. We really want to keep you engaged, if you could come back and train. But a lot of this, the stuff we were talking about earlier, the not investing in people, the expectation that you're leaving, the expectation that younger people are better, they're smarter, they have new by the way, fresh ideas. It's a little buzzword. I want people with fresh ideas means we don't want old people.

And so there are ways we talk about it. And so what happens is that we already have these internalized beliefs that as you get older, you're losing your edge, and then you get it reinforced all the time in the workplace that you are in fact losing your edge. And then you have to leave for a reason or you retire and then you want to come back. And that message is really loud. It says, "I can't do it anymore. I don't remember. I didn't learn this new technology." So there's a lot of internalized messaging that keeps us from coming back into the workforce when we would, and we want to be part-time employed, we want to be helpful. We want to go to Florida and come back and work. All of those are real things. And we need people to do that with these skills. And that's the message. That's the intentionality, the shift that we have to do is we have to shift all of those things. We have to shift the culture of our institutions to stop this idea

that younger is better, older is not cutting edge, is used up, is on the way out. And find ways, first of all, to build really highly functioning, multi-generational teams that build on the strengths that people have regardless of their ages.

To stop this idea that an age has something to do with functionality. It has nothing to do with functionality or what we're capable of. But we are really wedded to it. We are so wedded to it. We ask it on job applications. We are always ... When we're looking at a resume, when did they graduate? Ooh, that was a long time ago. Even with young people though, like, oh, they're not staying in more than a job, more than a year. We have all of these assumptions about how somebody is just based on what we can read, and we're not talking about those folks. So I think for me, it's a really important thing to say. We have to intentionally say that we value all people in our workplace, and then we have to build the culture that really drives that home. And right now we don't have that.

Tim Dentry:

Yeah. Thank you so much for that. Catharine, you started this in your last thought, but I'll ask you again. What comes to mind as far as what we're doing across Northern Light Health and to make sure that older workers feel welcome, feel valued?

Catharine MacLaren:

I don't mean this response to sound flip, but we don't necessarily treat older workers different than we treat anyone else, which I think is important. We have what I consider to be a really powerful culture of caring. We're always going to have opportunity because we all do as people. We always have opportunity. But I do think over 25% of our workforce currently is 55 and older. We have a lot of intergenerational, multi-generational teams working together, which I think is crucial. And one of the things that we do and we talk about and we can certainly do more is again, talking to people about what are you interested in? Where do you see yourself, where do you want to grow? What else might you want to do? And how could we make it a benefit to both the organization and the individual in the service of patient care? And so I think we continue to have those discussions and figure out where we have flexibility when it's needed, and then promote that. We pride ourselves on our culture of caring and being inclusive for all. And this is a significant part of our current and future workforce. So we will continue to do all of the things that we're doing and then certainly look at what else we could be doing.

Tim Dentry:

That's terrific. And I think you really underscored the added value of having a multi-generational workforce. If I could use that generic language. You made it personal and you made it personal in the way you said it to me and to all of our listeners, including Jess here of our culture of caring, this fits into our culture of caring, which we're very, very dedicated to. And listeners, this is one more example, this is our fifth season of trying to show multi-facets and linkages and examples and connections with exactly that. Our culture of caring and our culture of caring, that starts with caring for one another. That's people in the community, and that's our colleagues. And so this is really, really important. I'm so glad that we have drawn that linkage. I would like to ask each of you if you have any closing thoughts you'd care to share. And let me add a little facet to that question as well. Any questions either of you would have for the other? Jess for Catharine, Catharine, for Jess. But let's start with Catharine.

Catharine MacLaren:

Well, I have so many questions for Jess because I'm fascinated by the work that is going on on this. I probably can't ... Well, actually, maybe I'll ask this. What do you think is probably the biggest opportunity that we have? Not necessarily in healthcare, but in addressing older workers and ageism?

Jessica Maurer:

The biggest opportunity, I guess, is being more public in engaging people. So we need older workers. We do not have a sufficient workforce. Not trying to be political, but whatever is happening right now with our new administration and thousands of people losing their jobs, I really ... And I don't mean ... I really don't. This is a terrible time for all of those people. We do need fewer jobs, by the way, and that's not the way to do it. But my point is we're rearranging the deck chairs. We really only have so many people. And so I think the opportunity is a real public cultural shift that says we need older people to come back to work, and we want older people. And creating some level of support for that to happen. And it's starting to happen. Our state economist has started talking about it. Our Commissioner of Labor started talking. Our governor put out a press release last September around older workers' day or something like that. So the opportunity is really saying to really incredibly talented people, and I know them and they're volunteering and saying, "We need you to come back to work," and to convince them to bring their talent back into the workplace and that we'll do that in a flexible way.

Both of those things have to happen, particularly because so many people felt pushed out. So many people who have retired, and a lot of them during 2020 took early retirement because they could and didn't feel comfortable in all sorts of settings and didn't feel like their concerns were being ... There's a lot of bad feeling out there by really smart, talented people who felt like they weren't wanted in the workforce.

And so they're just done. I'm not doing it. I'm not coming back. So there's the opportunity right there is to convince those folks who have incredible talent that we want them back, and that we've shifted. That we've shifted our view at least as institutions. But I think this could be something the Maine Development Foundation does, and the Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Labor, which again, they're really doing a great job of reaching out to older workers to say, "We need you. We need you and we're going to do something different and we're going to actually value you." So therein lies ... I think we win, by the way, again, as a state if we figure out how to do that because we need older people working in every setting to make sure that our economy runs because our economy does run on workers. I

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, Jess. It's a really good question, Catharine and thank you for the answer, Jess. Catharine, anything else you would like to share before we start to wrap up? And I'll ask Jess the same question.

Catharine MacLaren:

Just that I really appreciate these opportunities. We talk about a wide range of topics, and certainly you have covered many in the podcast, and I think remaining curious is what is going to help us. And one other thing just based on what Jess just said that I've thought about a lot is why can't we in Maine be at the forefront of creating best practices around how we do this work? We have a lot of people who are committed to it and interested in it and understand why it's the right thing. So let's do that.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. Thank you. Jess, you got the last words.

Jessica Maurer:

I do. I didn't get to ask Catharine my question.

Tim Dentry:

Oh, there you go. That's part of your last words.

Jessica Maurer:

Well, I am curious. one of the pieces of work that we do, which is about supporting by the way, not just older workers, but caregivers in the workforce is really thinking about, are you thinking intentionally about ways to be more supportive? We still have a very child-centric ... There's 24,000 people turning 65, and we have fewer than 12,000 babies born every year. So we actually have a much more significant need for care, elder care for care of older people than we do for young kids. But we still, our focus continues to be on child care and it needs to be, so it's not an either or. But we also know that what happens is that people, they start taking their personal time to take care of older people who can't get care. They go part-time, they leave the workforce, they have a harder time coming back, or they don't bother to come back because now they've been a caregiver for two and a half years, and they think again that they've become rusty.

And so it's a little bit of a segment shift, but thinking about what are you all thinking about in terms of supporting family caregivers in your workforce, and also helping to think about how do we grow this other segment of the care economy workforce to make sure that our workers can get the care they need for older people?

Catharine MacLaren:

So two things come to mind. One is that I would say yes, we have many employees who are caring for aging parents or spouses to your point, or partners or what have you. And we take the same approach that we do with childcare because it isn't one or the other. One's not better than the other, it just is. And people are in the situation that they're in. I can say I have a couple of people on my team who are exactly in that type of situation. And so we navigate it as we go. Those needs are super important, and sometimes they're not planable. So it becomes a question of how do we balance the work with the needs of the family? For the most part, I think it's pretty workable if you're having honest, candid, respectful conversations with each other about what's needed and what's happening, what's going on, et cetera. So I think that that is a really important piece.

The other thing I wanted to say about that is that there was a time when we would do trainings for hiring managers, and we would say, if there's a big gap on the resume, that's a red flag. And we've shifted more to find out about that. That might be something. I can say that from experience. I have a brother who, because of my niece's school schedule during COVID, he left work and for a couple of years to be able to care for her. And now he's gone back to the workforce. He's actually serving older people in Massachusetts. Apparently it's a family thing. And he said it was really interesting interviewing where people would ask and not just assume that, oh, there was something not right going on, which has often historically been an assumption. But to your point earlier, people take time off from work for a variety of things and why isn't that okay? If you think about what kind of life experience is someone getting, they don't have to be in the workforce at every moment of their adult life in order to be able to bring an add a lot of value. So those are a couple of things that come to mind.

Jessica Maurer:

That's terrific. And I was going to say, that reminds me to say that if you haven't seen it, you should check out the Stanford University New Map of Life, which talks about the fact that most folks who are born today ... And I always say we have to solve for climate. Will live till they're a hundred years old. And so we have to rethink everything. We need to build longevity ready communities. We have to see life experience as critically important. And one of the 10 steps in there is working longer with more flexibility. And I think to your point, Catharine, exactly, this is going to become the norm that people maybe don't go to college as quickly as possible. They work for a while, and then they go to college and maybe they work then for a while longer, and they take a gap year and then they have kids. There is an opportunity here, to see where we are, we can see it as a challenge or we can see it as this incredible opportunity to reimagine. Not every generation or a group of people get an opportunity to reimagine

what's next, but we do get to do that because we have this new longevity and this workforce shortage, and so we get to design what's next. And I think that's pretty exciting.

Catharine MacLaren:

Yeah. Tim, I know I'm done, but let me just say one thing based on what Jess just said, which is, it's so interesting to me when I hear hiring managers in our organization say, "Well, they just don't work like we used to. They don't care about the same things we ... They're not the same as we used to be." That's right. So let's figure out ... But let's get our arms around what is wanted and needed, and then figure out how to offer that in a way that gets our work done and our patients served.

Tim Dentry:

Terrific. And what a great discussion we've had. Jess and Catharine, thank you so, so much. I really appreciate you sharing the experiences and the dialogue and questions and answers were just terrific. And thank you to our podcast listeners as well. Until next time, I'm Tim Dentry, proud elder encouraging you to listen and act, to promote our culture of caring that starts with caring for one another. Thank you.

Announcer:

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