

Meet Wylecia Wiggs Harris

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New AHIMA CEO Excited to Foster HIM Reimagined Implementation, Focus on Member Priorities

Transformational change in an industry can be scary—and cause many professionals to shy away from the challenge. But it's the transformational change facing the health information management (HIM) industry that attracted new AHIMA CEO Wylecia Wiggs Harris, PhD, CAE, to the job.

The prospect of leading an association during a time of adaptation and change excited Harris, she says, who has done similar work in previous senior leadership positions at associations like the League of Women Voters of the United States and the American Nurses Association.

While researching her next career opportunity, Harris says she saw the AHIMA CEO job posting and started reading on AHIMA.org about HIM Reimagined—the association initiative focused on moving the profession into emerging healthcare roles that use current and high-level HIM skills, such as auditing coding, clinical documentation improvement, data analytics, informatics, and information governance.

“I am a transformative leader, and with AHIMA it is an opportunity to not only touch the association and look at how the association can be a better version of itself, but there is also an opportunity to touch the profession and ultimately the [healthcare] consumer,” Harris says. “I have always been focused on making a difference and changing lives. And I think that focus aligns perfectly with AHIMA’s mission.”

As AHIMA CEO, one of Harris’s top priorities is ensuring HIM Reimagined is successful and embraced by members. The need to update one’s skills based on current technology and workforce demands is not unique to HIM, she says, but is a common trend for associations like AHIMA—which turns 90 this year.

“Most of the organizations or associations I have been involved in are legacy associations, or organizations that are 100-plus years old. Which means they have reached a point in their lifecycle where they have to make decisions about whether the factors that contributed to organizational success in the past will continue to support success in the future,” Harris says. “And so that ability to diagnose relatively quickly what I’m going to call the pain points and develop a plan or pathway to move an organization forward—that is one of the skill sets that I will bring to my role as the AHIMA CEO.”

Harris’s History of Healthcare and Nonprofit Work

Healthcare and nonprofits have always been a passion for Harris, who started as AHIMA’s CEO on February 5. In addition to her COO role at the American Nurses Association, Harris has served as executive director of the Center for American Nurses, executive director of the Maryland-based Sister to Sister Foundation, a national organization supporting women’s health issues and heart disease education, and as senior vice president and executive director at the American Heart Association. “Once I discovered the nonprofit sector I fell in love with it, and I do consider myself an association professional,” Harris says.

Harris holds a PhD in organizational development from Capella University, based in Minneapolis, MN; a master of management degree from Northwestern University, based in Evanston, IL; and both a bachelor and honorary doctorate of humane letters degree from Wittenberg University, based in Springfield, OH. She is an American Society of Association Executives-certified executive director and certified facilitator for leadership assessments through the Center for Creative Leadership.

“I have worked very hard to hone my craft as an association professional. I believe that my academic credentials do support the work that I have done,” Harris says. “My doctorate is in organizational development

and leadership. I am passionate about developing strong leaders—volunteers and staff. I have an interesting combination of soft and hard skills. I have a MBA in health management, marketing, and business policy. My ability to leverage the hard skills with compassion for people has enabled me to serve as an effective leader in the association world.”

Below Harris talks to the *Journal of AHIMA* about the importance of HIM Reimagined, how an initial focus on association staff will pay off for members, and how you should think twice before challenging her to a game of Scrabble.

Q: Through your work at the American Nurses Association and the American Heart Association it sounds like you did have an introduction to the role that medical records play in healthcare.

Harris: That is true. And it was a limited introduction, not as extensive an introduction as the one I am currently receiving. Patients as informed consumers is an interest that I have had for a while. Some of that interest is driven professionally, but it is also driven personally as I understand the importance of being an advocate for one’s health and to advocate for the health of your loved ones. The availability of accurate information to support informed decision-making aligns with my desire to make a difference and serve as an effective advocate.

Q: How have you been getting up to speed on the HIM profession and how the association works?

I have reviewed AHIMA.org several times as well as reviewed annual reports dating back to 2012. I have a stack of reading materials on my desk that I am working my way through including the history of AHIMA, Health Information 101 CSA Excellence presentations, and HIM data, trends, and environmental scans. Further, I have met with all senior staff, scheduled introductory meetings with the leaders of all AHIMA-related organizations, and I am in the process of scheduling individual meetings with all AHIMA board members. I have leveraged my own personal network to schedule briefings on the HIM profession and have begun to identify opportunities to interact with AHIMA members.

Q: What are your main priorities as AHIMA CEO, things you will be working on in the first few months?

My initial priority when assuming the leadership helm in an organization is always to assess the staff leadership capacity. This is my starting point because I recognize that strong leaders who are able to excite individuals to follow them as leaders help to establish a strong foundation for the organization. Without leadership strength it is challenging to move business objectives forward and effectively address membership needs.

There are two things that I learned early in my career. People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care. And that if you really want to move an organization forward, the starting point is developing people and leveraging their expertise and passion. And so that is why for me as the CEO of AHIMA, understanding where we are from a staff perspective is critically important. And those are also lessons I’ve learned from prior associations—painful lessons that I have learned that AHIMA is really the beneficiary of—[for example,] what happens when you are so focused on strategy and innovation that you neglect the key internal stakeholders, including staff. It is easy to say that staff members are one of our most important resources. We can’t just say it, we have to mean it. Treating staff as our most important resource means by extension we are outlining the expected behaviors for how we will treat all of our stakeholders—members, certificants, and external partners. I am a strong believer in alignment between our professed values and our actions.

I’m also looking to understand our membership model, recruitment and retention strategies, whether our products and services are addressing market demands, whether we are being as responsive as possible when there are issues or complaints brought to our attention, looking at some of the technology challenges that have been issues in the past to make sure that we are still on the right course for addressing those issues.

It’s an ambitious agenda for the first few months and all of it is essential to help me get up to speed quickly to understand AHIMA and the HIM profession.

Q: With regards to HIM Reimagined, the HIM profession is in a state of transition, with experts predicting that HIM and coding jobs will be transitioning into higher-level positions and that the membership needs to grow and get some additional skills in order to remain relevant. So you are coming in at a really interesting time for HIM and AHIMA itself. As CEO how does this looming change over the industry impact your job and your vision for AHIMA?

Well, change is difficult even when people know there is a need to change and transform. We have an obligation to help our members navigate the pace of change, and we need to be clear on the path forward. And I do think that HIM Reimagined lays out that path. There is a plan, we need to execute that plan seamlessly, we need to understand the concerns of our members as we work through the implementation of how to best support our members' transition to the new roles that may be required.

So how do we continue to retool as a staff team, as a board, in support of our membership? While I focus a lot on staff, it is all in support of the membership. AHIMA has to be the best that AHIMA can be in order to help its members be the best that they can be.

Q: Outside of work, what are some interests you have or things you would like readers to know about you personally?

I am an animal lover. I have a cat named KC and a chihuahua named Missy. We are generally at least a two-pet household, often more. I like puzzles, I find putting puzzles together to be very relaxing. I play a mean game of Scrabble. In my household I am known as the Scrabble queen. Family is very important to me; I am family-oriented [Harris is married and has a step-daughter]. Time permitting, I do like to read non-fiction. And I do like being active in the community doing volunteer work.

Q: This interview provides a direct communication line to AHIMA members. Anything you want to say to members specifically?

I am looking forward to the opportunity to engage with and meet members. Members are the lifeline of any membership organization, and that is true for AHIMA as well. We could not do the things that we do without a strong membership base. And it has been gratifying, frankly, to learn more about the wonderful things that our members do and contribute to the profession and contribute to AHIMA.

It is clear to me that we have a dedicated membership group. And we owe it to our members to be strong partners and to do all we can to position them for continued success. For them personally as professionals, but also because of the tremendous opportunity we have to impact the healthcare arena.

With such rapid change occurring in healthcare, AHIMA— both the association and the membership—must continue to push ourselves to grow and go beyond current opportunities and position ourselves to capitalize on the changes occurring. This is an exciting time to partner with members, the AHIMA board, and staff on the future of the association and the HIM profession.

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