

Protecting America from Deadly Diseases

Sherri Berger, MSPH '96, is COO at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention during the largest Ebola epidemic in history.

By Elizabeth Engasser, Class of 2015

The recent Ebola virus outbreak – the largest in the virus's history – has made the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) one of the busiest places to work in the country.

Among those at the helm is chief operating officer Sherri Berger, MSPH '96, a former principal epidemiologic investigator for the U.S. national public health institute.

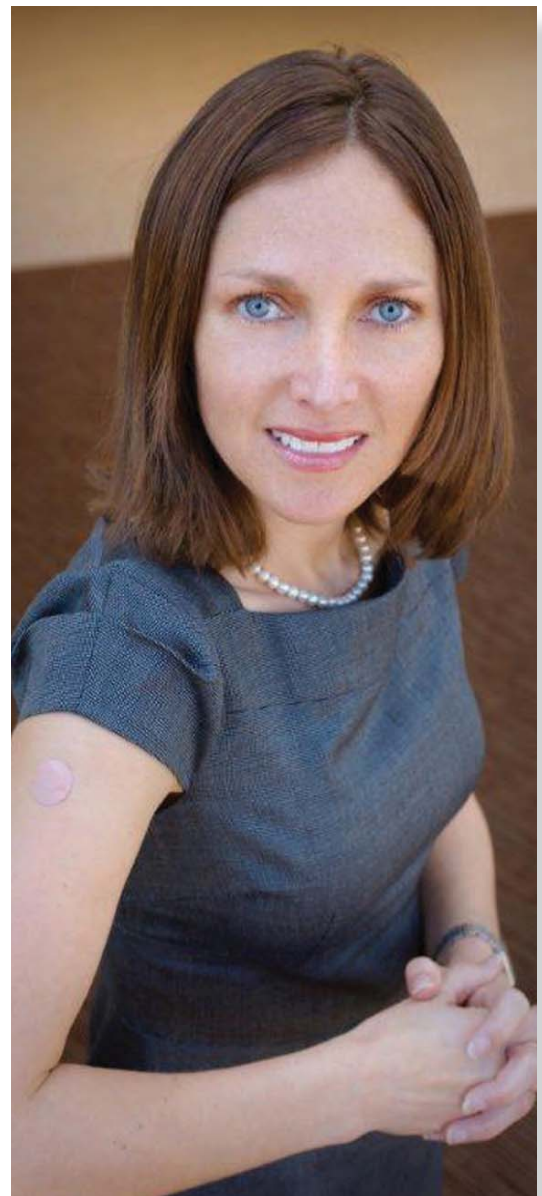
"Things have been crazy here," Berger said in an email interview. Protecting Americans during the deadly Ebola outbreak has tested her commitment to maintaining work-life balance.

All of her free time is spent with her 12 year-old son, Jacob. The two go to the theater and the movies, and take their dog for long walks.

COO since 2011, Berger oversees an office of 1,600 federal employees in Atlanta, the CDC's headquarters, and thousands of contractors. She's responsible for human resources, facilities management, budgeting and making sure the CDC has the resources to meet its goal – protecting Americans from health threats both here and abroad – and saving lives.

Her job also includes hosting visiting elected officials and their staffs, which recently included President Barack Obama, who stopped in to support the CDC's efforts fighting Ebola.

"Each day offers a chance to build on our successes and figure out what we can do better,"





she said. “Still, many times the things I deal with are unique and unpredictable. Regardless, I try to approach each conversation, each meeting and each issue the same way: listen, evaluate and then act.”

Berger joined the CDC in 1996 after being one of four graduate students selected to participate in the federal agency’s Experiential Learning Program. Assignments ranged from serving as a project officer to conducting her own research, and gave her an advantage when she applied for a position as an epidemiologist after graduating USF.

She eventually found herself in the business management side of the organization in positions of increasing responsibilities and leadership.

Working in the public health sector wasn’t always Berger’s plan. She earned her undergraduate degree in political science from the University of Florida, and pursued graduate school after her mother advised her to “get more education” under her belt. She applied to USF’s College of Public Health with a plan to pursue a career in hospital administration.

“I spent a lot of time in hospitals and doctor’s offices when I was growing up” because her

father spent years fighting cancer, she said. “I also did volunteer work in a hospital while I was in college. It’s a setting I felt comfortable in and I found medical care fascinating.”

But two professors, Dr. Thomas Mason and Dr. Charles Mahan, turned her interests to epidemiology.

“(Mason’s) love for teaching was so inspiring, and his ‘on the ground’ experience in the public health service impassioned me to follow in his footsteps,” Berger said. “(Mahan) was able to bring public health to a state and local level for me. He helped me apply what I learned in the classroom to real-life experiences through my projects with the local health department and volunteer work.”

She feels lucky to have her dream position at the CDC, and to be part of work that’s both exciting and gratifying.

“(The researchers’) work has been portrayed a lot lately in the media, and it’s really just as amazing in real life as it is in the movies,” she said. “They are working 24/7 to track down deadly diseases, and to prevent and respond to the next possible outbreak.” 🦋



Pictured left is Berger with a small bandage on her arm from a CDC promotion for annual flu shots.

Berger with her 12-year-old son Jacob.