In his first in-depth interview since becoming president and CEO of the American Health Care Association in July, Hal Daub explains why he took the job and what’s in store for members and other stakeholders. The admitted policy wonk is a former Nebraska mayor and U.S. congressman intent on making a long-range impact.

Q: Only half-jokingly, some people might call you crazy for taking this job. Why do this, and why now?
A: When I was contacted and presented with this professional opportunity, I read carefully through the job description and did some preliminary research and concluded this job opportunity was as if a tailor had fit it to me like a hand to a glove. The reaction was one basically of just elation. I have always enjoyed and appreciated the challenge of making wise and workable policy. That is a passion for me.

My work as chairman of the permanent Social Security advisory board for the last three years in particular whet my appetite for the dramatic aging demographic in for our future. When you look ahead at the next 30 years and see more people over 65 than in our active workforce, you can see the challenges ahead.

This is kind of a rough-and-tumble public policy arena in a way. But the end result is we think about our patients not just as aged and frail, but also those who are disabled, who need subacute or skilled nursing care. And what an evolution has occurred up to this point. I think my excitement is being part of this revolution that has to take part.

Q: What, in your opinion, are the absolute necessary traits to get the job done right?
A: It is going to take executive management skills and, hopefully, a tactful bedside manner, persistence and focus. And, I think, a real effort to be more pro-active to elevate the profession in the eyes of the policy makers, as well as the public, who rates quality of care.

The national search committee came up with a list of names while doing its work and my name came up from a number of their contacts. To begin with, quite honestly, I told them, ‘No thank you.’ I have a robust private practice in a more than 300-member firm and have achieved the kind of practice I had planned in three years. And, of course, I love Omaha — I was mayor for more than six years.

I was enjoying life so this kind of was a call out of the blue. They called back three days later and said would you at least look at the package? Reading it was like a bolt of lightning. And I spent a fair amount of time doing my due diligence relative to this opportunity, too.

Q: When did you first truly envision yourself as the top executive of the nation’s biggest nursing home association?
A: The day that I got the packet of information from the search team. I reviewed it and said, ‘You can leave my name on your list.’ I think they sorted the list to 10 and then to 5. They interviewed all five of us in Washington. I was told they would narrow it down to two, but I’m pleased to say they deliberated and called me on the phone. The seven-member search committee recommended that I be extended the offer, without the final step they had planned.

By virtue of my background, training and experience, it fit like a glove.

At moments, I feel like a mayor again — a lot of shuttle diplomacy and keeping in touch and consensus gathering. A federation moves more slowly than a true association. You have to gather that consensus.

Development of policy to some is a little frustrating, but if you look at it carefully, you have more than 10,000 facilities, both for-profit and not-for-profit models. They’re large and small, and Mom-and-Pops — quite a bit of diversity.

This is a pretty big job, not only the subject matter but also management. Building blocks takes real team effort. That will be one of the biggest things.

Chip Roadman is an outstanding scholar, a fine clinician, a great leader, and he took this association from a shambles of five to six years ago to credibility in this business. It will be my pleasure to build on this legacy for our future.
Q What is your time frame for getting familiar with your new surroundings and environment? How do you plan to familiarize?

A I have a rule of thumb I use in a new organizational environment. I have a 120-day guideline. I said to my executive staff in my first meeting with them, and the next day at an all staff meeting: I would set for myself a goal of 120 days to review and carefully evaluate the people, the policies, the organization as a whole, how we transact this business, and then give them my written plan for the future. I would give them not only my assessment of current circumstances but would also indicate in detail my goals for plans and projects to move forward, expand the membership base.

I said to the staff, ‘You should look forward to coming to work on Dec. 15 with anticipation, and there should not be anxiety between now and then.’ We’re going to be a solid, more effective team.

Q How are you going to become familiar enough so quickly to issue such a report?

A The staff must have killed every tree in a Redwood forest in preparation for me. I received three massive books that each are about four inches thick and weigh 15 pounds. They essentially break things down by policy, issues, the organizations. A fourth book was prepared and has profiles of each of the more than 80 professionals in Washington. They each prepared a self-description, and I also asked for a biographical sketch and what they do. I wanted to know about their hobbies and families and what they like. I’ve also done my own independent research to help understand.

The process of transition has been wonderfully done. I was hired about a month and a half before the mid-year board meeting in Salt Lake City (July 19), at which the change of leadership occurred with the passing of an F-16 stick. It was a very symbolic way of doing it. I’ve also been able to go to a board meeting and participate in the conference of state legislatures, where we had the most popular session, on dual-eligibles.

I’ve told the state association executives I’d be happy to come visit, but I don’t want to just come, have dinner with the board, give a speech and go. They have to pay me — with one or two visits to member facilities — while I’m there. I want to meet and talk with the people who work in these facilities, see what the CNA’s feel. That will give me a lot quicker sense, and I think I can ramp up quicker having those experiences.

Once, while I was on the House Ways & Means Committee (as a U.S. Congressman), I was strapped in a wheelchair for essentially a whole day. That is really an experience and a lesson I will never forget. I always try to put myself in the shoes of other people.

Q Speaking of certified nursing aides, do you plan to take CNA training to experience their work first hand?

A Chip did that, and I actually met with the president of NAGNA (National Association of Geriatric Nursing Assistants). I am interested in it, but it doesn’t make sense for me to do it right now, given the ambitious plans the board has laid out for me.

I don’t want to say I will or won’t do it and then not follow through on it. I don’t have to do it to realize how important CNA’s are to us.

Q What should people know about your personal management style? Your general motto on achieving success?

A I have a couple of rules. One is that I really only expect a person to do their job. They should not expect me to be interested in doing their job for them. I am a very strong believer in teamwork.

There’s a Lyndon Johnson story about how was he couldn’t have gotten there by himself. We all need help and get a whole lot more done when we all work together, especially when you don’t care about who gets the credit. I won’t micromanage, but I read a lot and try to be knowledgeable. The reason is I was struck with the making of public policy a long time ago. To be a good decision maker in this realm, you have to be knowledgeable.

The reason is one perspective can be advocated articulately and compellingly, and you can say that makes a lot of sense. The next day a person with an opposite view can wax eloquent with data and precision. The question is whom do you believe?

With sufficient knowledge, you can make a good decision. I hunger for sufficient knowledge. I really believe you bring the best out of people with that sort of approach.

We will do off-sites, retreats. I believe in working sessions where let your hair down. I’m sort of a Gallup University believer. You build on peoples’ strengths rather than try to resolve the negatives.

You waste all your time kind of living in the past if you go the other way. I want to spend our time living in the future. I’m sort of a futurist. I will admit I’m sort of a risk taker, but when you get good people around you, you can plan to succeed. But when you fail to plan, you fail.

I don’t want to be the last one to know we have a problem. I like to develop a matrix for success. I’m very high on organizational success.

Q Do you have any special plans for the F-16 flight stick you received from Chip Roadman on your first official day?

A This is a real stick given to him when he left and had a change of command once [in the Air Force]. He kept it and prized it. It symbolizes, to a degree, power and going forward. In a jet aircraft, you can’t go backwards. The idea is to go fast and go forward. It sits on my desk, in my office. My intention is to pass it on to the next person.

Q What is your particular strength for this position, and field?

A I think I have the ability to quickly grasp the lay of the land, be it legislative or regulatory or management issues. And to lead the team to a solution in an effective way, organizing a matrix or deliverable framework with a set of to-dos and then manage the execution or implementation of that plan.

I think I’m a good organizer and imple-
menter. I think I also have the ability to set a vision. But vision by of itself can lead to false expectations, so one has to not only have vision, which I think I have, but also have to have a sense of flavoring that with practical judgment. If you set a vision and can’t execute a fair amount of that vision, you end up disappointing people and falsifying that expectation.

People will sort of say, “We never seem to get there.”

You have to flavor that vision with practical judgment, with the ability to plan and execute. You have to be able to get things done — you have to win.

**Q** What new or different projects do you think you’d like to do, or have the association do?

**A** I’m not going to talk about that now. We’ll have to wait until the last two weeks of December. I don’t want to prejudge by suggest, or even give preliminary thoughts. I’ve been on the job two weeks, though I have been studying up for three months already.

**Q** How will AHCA be different three years from now under your guidance?

**A** It will be different. I’m not going to get specific. I don’t want to envision at this point because it would be premature.

For America to be prepared to deliver quality care to so many more people who will need quality care in long-term care settings, that is an undertaking to get legislation that is almost unfathomable right now.

**Q** When your time is done with AHCA, what do you want the epitaph on your tenure to be?

**A** When my epitaph is struck on the tombstone on my last day, well, maybe it won’t actually be struck for three or four years after that to realize the full impact.

When work at making workable public policy, you plan things that are far reaching and require some quantifiable assessment for years to come.

Maybe it would be, “He served well and was steadfast to the goal of making sure we deliver economical quality care to America’s elderly, frail and disabled. He was part of that mosaic and helped paint a better picture of America.”

I’m 64. I told the directors I’d give them at least five years, if they’d keep me around that long. I have some ideas and goals, and the search committee and board are simpatico on those general objectives.

We as a nation are not nearly as prepared as we must get to be. We as a nation have about six to 10 years to get there. In three to five years, the profession will be much different. It’s a rapidly changing environment that requires us to think more long-range.

My assessment preliminarily is we’re not thinking long-range enough and how much it takes us to evolve. Early baby boomers can take early Social Security in four years, and then those numbers don’t just climb the chart gently, they skyrocket.

**Q** What are your thoughts on achieving financial stability within the long-term care sector?

**A** Part of the answer for public and private long-term care is in risk capital coming back into this marketplace. Because seven of every 10 dollars paid is taxpayer money, policymakers could do great to stabilize that funding. Maybe not increase it so much, but to leave it stable.

Risk capital will come back in and really shoulder the load we’re talking about. That stability is important because then owners can have stability in the workforce. Don’t cut the funding and don’t over regulate.

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