

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 30
Dayna Swanson

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back, and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Dayna Swanson, System director of governance at Bozeman Health. Dana is relatively new to this role after serving as director of government relations for Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and as state director for United States Senator Jon Tester.

Dayna Swanson I just think looking in the rearview mirror, which I don't often like to do, I like to look in the windshield. But I think if we would have had a better federal guidance when it started, I think that we wouldn't have seen the chaos that came down into communities.

Justin Angle Dayna is passionate about public service and has come home to Montana to work in health care during an especially challenging time. Dayna, thanks for coming on the show today.

Dayna Swanson You're welcome. Glad to be here.

Justin Angle Yeah, so tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Dayna Swanson So I grew up in Anaconda, Montana. My dad was a public school teacher grade school for thirty eight years in the Anaconda public schools. And my mom was a stay at home mom until my youngest sister went to school, and my mom then went to work at the

Southwest Montana Federal Credit Union and worked her way up to be the head teller at that. And retired about 10 years ago from her position there.

Justin Angle OK, and tell us about growing up in Anaconda. What was that like?

Dayna Swanson When I was a young girl, the smelter was still running and the copper was being mined in Butte and they would send it over on a train and smelt it. And so my memories of being there, the smokestack had smoke billowing out of it when the smelter was running. And I remember as a young girl waking up in the best way I can describe this is if somebody were to take a bite or suck on a matchbook, the sulfur. And we would wake up and there'd be so much sulfur in the air and a terrible taste, you know, would be in my mouth and my brothers mouths. And of course, this kids, you complain. And my mom and dad would say the smelters are running and it's creating jobs. Rinse your mouth out and, you know, get the sulfur taste will go away.

So growing up there, when that smelter was running and I've told the story many times, we didn't have flies or bees or birds because the air quality was so terrible, like nothing lived. Grass green grass was barely anything. If people had lawns that were green, it was sort of out of the ordinary. And so fast forward to today, it is now an environmental Superfund site. It is, if not the biggest one of the biggest in the entire country. But that's what we knew, and it closed when in 1980. And so I was all of what, nine years old, eight or nine years old. And what that happened is including some of my family members. It devastated the economy in an economy, the jobs were lost and people had to move, including some relatives. Those are the memories. And then it closed and I came to college over here at the University of Montana. But fast forward to the present anaconda. Just like a lot of Montana's getting discovered. There is hunting, there is fishing, there is skiing, there is biking there, you know. And so I feel like maybe on a kind of on the cusp of growing a little bit.

Justin Angle So you mentioned it came here as a student. What did you study as an undergrad?

Dayna Swanson Yeah, I studied political science, so I have a degree in political science with a minor in communications studies. And when I graduated in 1993, I chose to turn right back around and go to graduate school.

Justin Angle Right, in the MPA program.

Dayna Swanson And I was young. I was 22. I was the youngest in the class and I was able to finish my degree in two years. So I finished that in 1995. And the work that that that department, you know, it prepared me to be a public servant. That is how I wanted to spend my career is to serve the public. Part of that reason is, as I grew up in a very political family and, you know, my dad being a public servant as a teacher and my grandfather serving in the state Senate and then as a county commissioner in Anaconda. My mom at the age of 60, decided she wanted to run for the state legislature and did and served her eight terms before she excuse me, eight years before she was term limited out. So public service, I say, is in my blood. And so I chose to get my degree in public administration to be able to be a public servant, and I'm very proud of that work.

Justin Angle So this deep kind of commitment to service that is part of your upbringing and sort of becomes part of your value set. How are you thinking you want to apply that passion? Is it on particular issues or is it to serve the people like what is kind of the motivation behind that work?

Dayna Swanson Yeah. Initially, it was to serve the people. And at this point in time, I have not wanted to run for any public office, but I've always and I even remember finishing school in the MPA program, always wanted to go work for a person who a politician, quite frankly.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Dayna Swanson And so that opportunity came for me and I remember in 2005 and I was watching TV and there was a campaign ad ran against Senator Conrad Burns. And at the time, I was young and didn't quite agree with Senator Burns's politics. And I thought, Well, I want to go work for and see if we can beat him. Maybe he's vulnerable because he had been in office for not quite 18 years, and so I went and worked for the Montana Democratic Party as a field organizer.

Justin Angle Just trying to get involved.

Dayna Swanson Just trying to get involved, honestly. And there was a primary back then. People who might be listening will remember there was a primary between John Morrison and John Tester. Jon Tester came out of the primary and ultimately beat Senator Conrad Burns by 3,562 votes. I then had the honor. He asked me to come work for him as his deputy state director and jumped right in.

Justin Angle So at some point you make the decision to move on from working for Senator Tester. Talk about that decision and you've moved into health care and we'll talk about that transition.

Dayna Swanson Yeah. So I, my partner is Denise Juneau, and she got hired to be the Seattle superintendent of public schools. And we made a decision to move to Seattle. And both of us are Montana natives. And when she got that job, the senator was up for his 2018 reelection and I committed to him and his family to stay through that reelection because it was important to me to help get do my part to get him across the finish line and transition out of that job in December of 2018. So Denise and I moved to Seattle and I was able to take some time off, which was really nice and I thought about what I want to do next, and I was very purposeful. I did. I did not want to go back into politics working for a person, but wanted to also look at

different issues and the two that that I am passionate about. Number one, the environment because of where I grew up in a Superfund site, knowing how important to have a clean and healthful environment is in conservation. And the second is health care. I thought, I'm going to take a stab at health care and it's not my background and I'm not a policy expert in health care. But coming through the Affordable Care Act, which was the whole country knows, is contentious as that was, and hearing and understanding some of the frustrations with health care and people who aren't covered or if they got sick and then couldn't be covered and all of that. And so I started applying for jobs in Seattle and I got a job as the director of government relations for the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance.

Justin Angle Fantastic organization.

Dayna Swanson Oh my gosh, so good. It's an incredible and really was honored to be able to go work for them and be their eyes and ears on federal and state and, quite frankly, local policy as it pertains to health care. With Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, it is cancer, right? Like they don't go treat you if you broke your leg, but they're very it is a very specific health care. So dove right in during the beginning of the pandemic. And this is an important part because Seattle was ground zero for COVID 19, and the governor at the time really shut the state down pretty quickly. And he called it the stay home. Stay healthy. And then I get this great job at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and they said, Come get your laptop and we are all remote period.

What an odd time to start.

So I get this call on New Year's Eve of 2020 from my supervisor, and she says to me, leadership thinks you're doing a really good job. Can you set up a COVID vaccine clinic? Because we knew the vaccines were coming. And I I said, Huh, well, I've never done that. But sure, I'll help. And she's like, Great, you know, there's going to be Zoom calls and whatnot. So I was part of a lead to set up a pretty darn good vaccine clinic in Seattle, Washington, in 19 days. We, meaning the country, was told there's a lot of vaccines. You know, these vaccines are

great. So we set this clinic up with the capacity to administer two thousand vaccines a week, up to 2000 vaccines a week, like it was such a great. I'm really proud of it. And I would volunteer at that clinic once a week. And my job was to sign people up for second doses, and so I sat behind a computer and I have to tell you, Justin, it was it's emotional because these cancer patients for the first time felt they could go out and see a grandchild or a sister or a brother or a daughter. And and when I say it was emotional when we set this great clinic up, we did not account for the emotion of it. So we would have people get vaccinated and then the 15 minutes observation, and then some people would literally dance in the lobby. Some people would sob in the lobby. Some people would skip out. And so then we created a really beautiful space for the emotional part of it, because that became very clear. Initially, that was important.

Justin Angle Yeah, I'm thinking about the intensity in your household. I mean, you entering health care in this particularly important but intense time. And your partner Denise is in public education running the public school system and pandemic hits. Like what? Gosh, were you just ships passing in the night?

Dayna Swanson Yeah. And she was the first superintendent in the country to put students remote.

Justin Angle Right.

Dayna Swanson You know, and so, yeah, it was intense. And but both of us doing what we felt was important to keep her for Denise to keep students and staff safe. And then for me to figure out how, because there's no template, Justin. There, there was no template. So yeah, I was busy in in our household. And but I will say, because we didn't go anywhere, you couldn't, you know, the governor had shut the state down only for essential businesses. So we had our evenings to just kind of be and we walked a lot around the neighborhood because that was the one thing you felt like you could do safely.

Dayna Swanson So, yeah, it was it was busy and and a little bit chaotic. But at the end of the day, I think we're both proud of the work that we were able to do.

Justin Angle You mentioned there being no template.

Dayna Swanson No.

Justin Angle How are you? Like, what are your guiding principles? Similarly, like where did you draw inspiration during that time?

Science. Period. The science is there and was there. And when I worked with these cancer doctors after my allergies, I mean oncologists, they don't see a pandemic or an illness as a politics. They see it as science, period. So for us at the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance and I was on probably two Zoom calls a day for months. The doctors and the state folks would watch what was happening in Europe, knowing it was coming across the water. And they have peers, not in America, you know, in other countries, in the peer saying it's real bad and it's very contagious. And all of a sudden we're getting these variants. I knew about the Delta variant probably before it was a household name because they knew. And then the template became follow what the science is saying, but I am not joking, if not every day or every week. We always had to modify because it was still coming so fast, so fast. So you modify based on what the science is telling you.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Dayna Swanson after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Dayna Swanson, System Director for Governance at Bozeman Health.

Yeah, I mean, that's one thing I think that gets lost sometimes is that, you know, one of the beautiful things about and scientific method is that you construct hypotheses and propositions

falsifiable. And so, yeah, we learn that some of the things we previously learned aren't quite true or there's more nuance or there's, you know, boundary conditions or however you want to describe it. And so, yeah, to be able to craft policy and communication strategies around science that's emerging in real time has to be a tremendous challenge.

Dayna Swanson And let's take a snapshot in time of the present. Yeah, science is now saying that with modern and Pfizer, people are likely going to need boosters. That's not because somebody is sitting being like, Well, maybe we should do boosters. It is all based on science and the waning of the vaccine. And so even now we're modifying this template. I don't know what else to call it, but we're modifying what we know to help keep people safe.

Justin Angle When you say science as the template or as the guiding light there. And I'm not an expert in this space, but there are different areas of science. So I've heard some debate between sort of like the hard medical science and public health science in terms of how to distribute a vaccine, for example. You hear public health experts would say, you know, maybe it's better off to get as many single doses out of the different vaccines, or maybe you should design a vaccine that it doesn't have to be in the deep freezer, just optimize for a different set of parameters. If you're looking at it from a health public health perspective, then a medical science perspective. Do you have any thoughts on how those different types of science need to be fused and used as inputs to a good policy?

Dayna Swanson I do. It's easy to look in the mirror and say, Oh, if we could have only dot dot dot right my rearview mirror, if, in my opinion, if there were better federal guidelines to bring 50 states together on getting this rolled out, I think I think that we wouldn't have seen the chaos that ensued and it was chaotic. And so you still have 50 states doing it 50 different ways, and I think people are tired of one worrying about it. I worry about it. You saw me when I walked in, like I forgot my mask. It was weird to be indoors without a mask. And I think you just have people who still don't believe it is as bad as it is.

And the vaccine became political and it never should have. And you know, I was talking to my mom the other day and she remembered as a young girl being lined up in a gymnasium to get the polio vaccine. And let's go back to a public health emergency. This is a public health emergency. This is about public health. And she said she said, you know, I was a young girl when I got it. But she said, I don't remember it being even an option. You just did it because nobody wanted to get polio, period. So yeah, I just think looking in the rearview mirror, which I don't often like to do, I like to look in the windshield. But I think if we would have had a better federal guidance when it started, I think that we wouldn't have seen the chaos that came down into communities.

Justin Angle You recently started as System Director of Governance at Bozeman Health. So first of all, why the decision to move back to Montana? And then we'll get into your current role and what what it what it's all about.

Dayna Swanson Yeah. So as you know, we were in Seattle and I got an email out of the blue from Bozeman Health asking if I would consider applying for the System Director of Governance. I read the job description. I was happily employed at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance doing really good work on their behalf and I thought, you know, my dad's voice ringing in my head. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. So I put my name in the hat and Dennis was winding down her position and I applied for it and I got an interview. And then the next day I got a call and the Director of Human Resources said the CEO and the board president wants to talk to you tomorrow. I talked to the CEO and were present in the next day. They offered me a position and the position, and I said, give me a day. And so Denise and I talked about it, and part of our conversation was, do we want to move back to a state that looks very different politically than when we left? And I will say that living in a in a blue bubble Seattle, I will say that the opposite end of that the progressiveness is also can be hard to, you know?

Justin Angle Yeah.

Dayna Swanson But with that being said, we are both Montana natives. Denise grew up on the Blackfeet Reservation in Browning, and you heard I grew up in Anaconda. We always knew we'd come home and this was an opportunity to come home. So I accepted. I said yes and we couldn't count. Not be more thrilled, I tell people I don't think I've quit smiling since we got back. So we moved home when I started at Bozeman Health and it is a great organization that has a very visionary CEO. John Hill is his name. I can't get away from working for Johns, apparently, and I'm honored to work for them. And so my job is there is I work very directly with the board of directors and I am part of the leadership team to grow a health care system. And when I say that it's, you know, Bozeman Health is growing, as you know. And you know, for years it was just Bozeman Deaconess Hospital and that was that. And John saw that, you know, as Bozeman is growing, you know, you got to grow the health system and open up different clinics, which he has done. And so I'm fairly new. I've been there a couple of months now, but I've got to sit through the board of directors meetings and them taking votes to invest in behavior health because I think that that is one area around this country we're going to need more of in. The board voted to a significant investment in inpatient beds for behavior health and continuing to grow of what the needs of that community are. And so it's fun to be on the ground being able to do that again, serving, and making sure people have access to health care.

Justin Angle When you're thinking of building a system, I mean, what are some of the you mentioned a few of the issues, whether it's the sort of composition of services that are offered or the number of facilities where those facilities are located. How do you conceptualize a system and what are some of the challenges that you're grappling with on a daily basis?

Dayna Swanson Yeah, I mean, workforce housing is is huge. Yeah. And I think so to grow the system, you have to hire more employees. But if employees can't afford to come live and work there, that is a huge issue. And so I think that growing that that has to be a component, and it's not for me to determine what that component is, whether it's raising wages. So, you know, a livable wage. Or maybe it is building some type of a of a workforce housing for employees to

be able to live and work in that community. Behavior health. And that's not just an issue in Bozeman, it's an issue around this country, especially during a pandemic, mental health and suicides and whatnot. If there are not systems that take care of behavioral health, we're going to see that start to grow exponentially. And I and especially during a pandemic when people are isolated. So growing a system that includes workforce housing and and behavioral health.

And then just making sure people can get to places, you know. I think some of us are fortunate we own and have transportation. Not everybody does. And so to make sure that there, you know, if it's not a walkable working with the city and county to make sure that there are means and ways to get to a health care service because also in this, I learned this from my experience at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. If you look at numbers, cancer rates are going down in the in the world, in this country, in the world. It's not because people aren't getting cancer. They're not going in to get treatment for the cancer. Because we were told not to. To be clear, don't come to a hospital unless you're really sick. And so having access and making sure that people are able to get to health care services is important.

Justin Angle And what is your view of some different conceptualization of access? I mean, whether it's telemedicine or smart devices in the home or, you know, you've like, testing has been an issue. For example, now you can go buy test kits and have, you know, not everybody can afford to do that necessarily. But thinking of ways to have touchpoints with health care that everybody can access in different ways.

Dayna Swanson Telehealth is so key. And when when we were all, the whole world was say, stay home, like, don't go anywhere because this is so contagious. We at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance were able to treat cancer patients through telehealth because they were able to say, I have this raspy cough or I have found a lump or whatnot. But in the same breath, and this is where I get very passionate, broadband. Because not everybody has access to internet. And we found that out even in Seattle, Washington, we literally had cancer patients that would go to hotel lobbies just to get the Wi-Fi to be able to take his or her appointment on a smart

device. OK, smart devices. Not everybody has smart devices, right? Or there's a generation that doesn't know how to use them, as well as different generations. So I feel like we've got to be more patient and diligent in making sure broadband is huge. And when I worked at Seattle Cancer Care Alliance, I just said those in the same breath, telehealth and broadband, because if you don't have broadband, you can't treat.

So now come back to Bozeman Health. There is, I think, opportunity for telehealth, but Montana is way more rural and so the broadband becomes a huge issue. And I know that that infrastructure package got passed. And broadband is coming, but it's going to take years. But I do think that telehealth has got to be part of the solution in access. The other thing as and I learn this, but I see it even in Bozeman. Not everybody English is not the first language for everybody. And so I think and, some people might disagree with that, but I really do think we have to be able to provide services for patients who English is not their first language. You know, in smaller states, maybe there's not a ton, but trust me in Bozeman, Montana. There are people that English is not their first language, and we as a health care system want to be able to treat them as equals as their counterparts who who do speak English. So a translator. Translation service. I mean, it's real.

Justin Angle Yeah. So Dayna, given just the intensity of the current moment we're in with, however, this pandemic hopefully winds down. Gosh, I mean, it's got to wind down at some point, I would hope. But given the intensity of this moment, the transition back to Bozeman, Montana and all the changes, in some of these big problems that you're tackling, what kind of gives you hope and vigor on a daily basis to keep pushing the boulder?

Dayna Swanson Yeah, I'm going to go back to public service. And even though so I work for nonprofit Bozeman Health is a nonprofit, but to me it's still serving, right? And I work directly with the board of directors, and I'm part of a leadership team that has a vision to be able to grow a health care system for a community, and it is a community. And so what gets me excited about it is one I'm still learning. It is new to me and not just the new job, but health care

in itself is still very new to me. I can't stress enough how odd it is to start in a pandemic, especially in health care. And then looking at the way out is for people to get vaccinated and to, you know, follow some protocols that the scientists have said, Hey, you know, probably still smart to mask up and whatnot.

That's going to take a long time in order to do that. The vaccines are now here. We do not have a shortage of vaccines anywhere in this country. And so it's a matter of, you know, hoping that people do choose to go get vaccinated for their own health. But the health of the other people in communities and that excites me. A Bozeman is the fastest growing community in Montana. And as we are there and Denise and I have both made commitments to serve in our communities as well as as a broader picture as well. And I feel like I get to do that every day by working for Bozeman Health and working with a great team. But we also are able to serve by going to volunteer our time as well.

Justin Angle Well, Dayna, it's been fantastic learning about your journey, sort of through Montana, outside to Seattle and now back. Thanks for the great work you're doing. Thanks for coming in today.

Dayna Swanson Yeah, we're we're thrilled to be back in Montana. Thank you, Justin.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by first security bank Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. We'll see you next time.

