



FIELDING SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
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May 28, 2015

County of Los Angeles  
Board of Supervisors  
Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration  
500 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Honorable Supervisors,

Members of the Los Angeles community have asked us to write you as you consider important decisions regarding the Departments of Public Health, Mental Health and Health Services. We write this letter as public health leaders who oppose the plan to reorganize the Los Angeles County Departments of Public Health, Mental Health, and Health Services under one umbrella agency. We understand the desire to enhance the coordination among the three departments to improve clinical care. However, we believe that the current proposal to place them under one agency will have little impact in improving coordination, and more importantly, threaten the ability of each department to be effective in fulfilling its department's unique mission. We therefore urge you to reject the plan to establish an umbrella agency over the Departments of Public Health, Mental Health, and Health Services.

The creation of a separate LA County Department of Public Health in 2006 was carefully planned with specific goals for administrative streamlining and an increased focus on programs, policies, and activities to improve the health of all 10 million county residents, not only the several hundred thousand receiving important clinical services from the County's extensive personal health care system.

Since the creation of the independent Department of Public Health, the ability of the County's public health workforce to effectively address complex population health issues has greatly improved. For example, the Department of Public Health has worked closely with cities to pass more than 120 local tobacco control policies, and implemented a variety of tobacco prevention and cessation interventions. During this time the tobacco use rate in the County has dropped to 13%. Another key success has been the development of a nationally recognized chronic disease prevention division that has successfully partnered with communities to change trends in major diseases such as heart disease and stroke. The Department has further demonstrated its leadership in bringing together key organizations to address serious issues. It has partnered with WIC, First 5 and others to stop and start reversing the increase in obesity among young children in the County.

Public health fundamentally approaches problems and needs very differently than clinical disciplines and also frequently works on a different time frame. Clinical services are usually provided to individuals for immediate needs; whereas, public health's efforts impact thousands or even millions at a time, often with a long term impact. Some of the major health concerns in Los Angeles County include obesity, violence, chronic diseases, and emergency preparedness. These concerns require multiple approaches

that are tailored to best reach diverse subpopulations and that are sustained over a long period of time. Public health efforts typically involve developing and sustaining long term partnerships with government agencies, community-based organizations, and community members. Public health aims to improve the health and well-being of the County's residents so there is less need for expensive clinical services. It will only be through continued investment and support in public health that we have any chance of substantially reducing health care costs.

Placing Public Health under an umbrella agency directed by the same leader as the Department of Health Services could easily result in Public Health's priorities for the entire County being crowded out by Health Services' patient centric priorities to serve the fewer individuals needing expensive medical care. It would be difficult for the umbrella agency, especially if headed by a health services leader, to balance the importance of the individual patient with that of communities served by Public Health.

It is essential the Department of Public Health retain budgetary independence under your Board and its budget should not be decreased in order to increase the budget for health care delivery; in fact, investments in public health can lead to both improved health and lower long term medical care expenditures. Most important is that the Health Officer, charged with important regulatory and health protection functions to benefit all residents, should not be hired by, report to, or be evaluated by the same person that directs the Department of Health Services because this creates a conflict of commitment that can erode the County's public health protection. The expertise, capacity and experience in the Department of Public Health make it the best entity to make priority policy, program and budgetary decisions to maintain and improve the health of the entire County's residents.

There is clearly room for the three departments to further improve the coordination of efforts among each other. However, it is unlikely that the proposed plan will result in this outcome. It is well known that merely combining three units within an organization is not sufficient to improve connectivity, collaboration, efficiencies, or effectiveness. There are numerous other approaches that could better achieve this goal of increased integration and complementarity. For example, the Board of Supervisors could establish a time-limited Task Force on Integrated Care Delivery and charge it with both integrating data systems and coordinating patient care across the three Departments, without creating a permanent new agency.

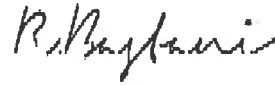
We also believe that this reorganization is not in the interests of the Department of Health Services. The Department of Health Services is currently engaged in a major effort to make its hospitals and clinics the providers of choice for the newly insured Medi-Cal and privately insured patients who used the system when uninsured. The success of other public systems in keeping the newly insured as members, such as Denver Health, show this is possible, but the recent setbacks experienced in similar efforts by New York City's Health and Hospital's Corporation to build its insured base underscore how challenging it is to successfully make and sustain the changes underway at LADHS. It would be a substantial distraction from the critical work of health system redesign for a new umbrella agency headed by the leader of LADHS to develop and direct a Department with a different mission. The proposed reorganization would also be a distraction for the Department of Mental Health in its important work of serving the mental health needs of the County's residents.

In sum, our opinion is that the proposed reorganization of the three county departments under an umbrella agency would reduce the effectiveness and efficiency of each of the three departments involved and should not be approved or implemented. If you would like to meet with any of us to share our thoughts around the reorganization, please let us know.

Sincerely,



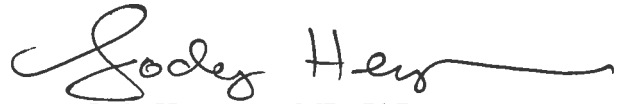
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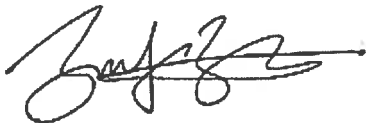
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