

John R Elpers, M.D.  
13000 Skyline Blvd.  
Woodside, CA 94062

Honorable Board of Supervisors

Hall of Administration  
500 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Supervisors,

I had the privilege of being the LA County Director of Mental Health from 1978 to 1984. Approximately a decade prior to my coming to LA County, the original Department of Health Services had been formed, consisting of hospitals and clinics, public health and mental health. For mental health services, that arrangement was an unmitigated disaster. Not only was mental health neglected by health care administrators more interested in general health care delivery, but its budget, primarily State money, was diverted to other uses -- administration and hospital support. The leaders of the LA County mental health services gradually left and there was a series of acting, powerless mental health chiefs. Demoralized staff were sending people most in need of services to state hospitals to be lost to follow-up. By 1978, LA County's mental services were an embarrassment to the entire State.

Due to strong advocacy by the Mental Health Advisory Board, parents, clients and mental health professionals, the Board of Supervisors agreed to remove Mental Health Services from DHS and establish an independent Mental Health Department reporting directly to the Board. I was hired to direct that department. Some of the previous leaders were brought back to the department and others were brought from the outside. It took time, but services were modernized, priorities established, persons most in need were again served and the dependence on expensive hospitals reduced with resources going to more effective services. Over the years, the LA County Department of Mental Health has again become one of the most respected in the State.

Mental health and substance use disorder services are very different from general health care services and not well understood by non-psychiatric physicians and health care administrators. Different types of staff are drawn to these services and they are not interchangeable with staff from general health care. Facilities are quite different and while co-location sometimes works often it does not. While people with mental health disorders need good health care and many physically sick people need mental health services, these shared services need to be provided by different personnel but with careful coordination.

I strongly urge you not to repeat the mistake LA County made four or five decades ago. The Coalition's proposal for an Office of Healthcare Enhancement is a much more appropriate approach and it comes from a wide array of knowledgeable and experienced people.

Sincerely,

J. R. Elpers  
Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Biobehavioral Sciences, Emeritus, UCLA