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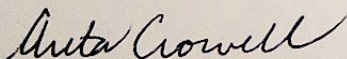
Honorable Mayor Mike Antonovich
Honorable Hilda Solis
Honorable Mark Ridley-Thomas
Honorable Sheila Kuehl
Honorable Don Knabe
Hall of Administration
500 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Dear Supervisors,

I was dismayed to learn of your effort to consolidate the major health related departments in Los Angeles County. My many years of working in huge organizations have convinced me that the real work of improvement occurs at the street level, not at the top of bureaucracies, no matter how appealing the rhetoric. The creation of a new health agency would be a distracting drain of necessary creativity and energy. Los Angeles deserves better, as I am sure you would agree.

I have been very pleased to learn of an alternative proposal for an Office of Healthcare Enhancement made to you by a Coalition of over 100 mental health and public health organizations. I strongly support that proposal and the analysis which it incorporates. It will be a better, more cost effective and result-oriented way to accomplish your goal of improved health for all the residents of Los Angeles County. My long years of working in many parts of the health sector to improve services lead me to oppose the agency construct and support the more focused approach of an Office of Healthcare Enhancement.

Yours sincerely,



Areta Crowell, Ph.D.
Director Emerita (1992-1998)
Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health
Director, Mental Health Services, San Diego County 1998-1992
Member, CA Managed Risk Medical Insurance Board 2002-2010

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