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S.B. County Public Health Allegations Head To Grand Jury

RIVERSIDE

By Chris Levister

Second Top Doctor Resigns Criticizes Agency's Leadership



Maury Manligius, DO, MPH, MS Acting Health Officer/Chief Public Health Medical Officer County of San Bernardino.

Seeking to defuse growing tensions surrounding the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, 5th District Supervisor Josie Gonzales has requested a grand jury look into allegations of mismanagement and inappropriate leadership made by the county's top doctor.

"It was the right thing to do," said Chief of Staff, Bob Page.

In a four-page letter to the Board of Supervisors, Dr. Maury Manliguis, the highest ranking medical official in the San Bernardino Department of Public Health abruptly resigned last week, questioning the competency of the current administration and called for a grand jury investigation into "questionable actions" by interim leaders.

"None of these people have any public health training and it also appears that they have a very limited interest in learning about and understanding the foundation, principles and vision upon which public health is founded," Dr. Manliguis wrote in his July 30 resignation letter.

Dr. Manliguis who was placed on administrative leave after writing the letter is slated to vacate his post as acting health officer effective August 22 after a little more than 6 weeks on the job.

He rose to top doctor when his predecessor Dr. Margaret Beed a board certified pediatrician and seasoned public health professional who served as Chief Medical Officer at the County of Orange Health Care Agency resigned in June after a little more than a year in the post.

"They have consistently marginalized the input of this agency's medical professionals including Dr. Beed and others. The pattern I'm seeing is that public health programs such as immunizations and HIV/AIDS education are dwindling and dwindling."

He wrote that the realignment toward a "clinic oriented direction." has begun to erode and defeat the true purpose of what public health programs are setup to be. If this trend continues "we will reach a breaking point."

Manliguis pointed to interim department director Jim Lindley and assistant public health director Paula Meares-Conrad as examples of underqualified administrators in the department.

Records show Lindley ran the county's purchasing department before assuming the interim director post. Records indicate prior to her appointment Meares-Conrad worked as a R.R.T. (registered respiratory therapist) and served as an advisory committee chairperson at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center.

Lindley said Dr. Manliguis had not discussed any concerns with him prior to resigning and that it remains unclear why he left the post. He added Dr. Beed didn't give a reason for her departure and he doesn't know what she is doing now.

"It would be prudent and beneficial to the department to have leaders with background and training in public health to avoid the appearance of indifference to the community and county at large," Dr. Manliguis wrote.

He said morale in the department is at its lowest, "people are leaving en masse, and this will continue to occur until something is done to address these problems."

County Administrative Officer Mark Uffer said Manliguis' concerns appeared to be an attempt to lash out at management.

"Lindley does not have medical training but does have a master's degree in public administration and has garnered praise for his leadership in the Purchasing Department, his prior post. He lacks overall public health experience, but he a very good manager," Uffer said. He said this week he plans to appoint Lindley the Department of Public Health's permanent director.

District 62 Assembly Member Wilmer Amina Carter (D-Rialto) praised Dr. Manliguis for speaking out.

"His actions took courage. I'm very concerned about these allegations. So many times we really don't know what the issues are and end up acting on hearsay. These concerns will not be taken lightly," said Carter.

She acknowledged county public health has a long history of festering problems. Those troubles were the basis for legislation introduced by Carter which would lead to the development of a comprehensive local health assessment and planning report. "It is imperative that the county hire and provide unbiased support for professionals with training and experience in public health."

Carter says she plans to discuss the allegations with Gonzales next week. "The supervisor agrees we have a problem and supports the creation of an agency that would serve, protect and ensure the public's health long term."

The health officer supervises the public health duties of the department and oversees the agency's physicians and health professionals.

Inland health activist and longtime critic of county health policies, founder and executive director of the African-American Health Initiative, Dr. V. Diane Woods, called the state of the agency shameful and dangerous.

"This is not a joke. This is not about differences in philosophy. When you've got the county's top doctor resigning weeks after his acting replacement stepped down, that's a huge red flag. It appears that our policy-makers and Board of Supervisors do not believe the state we

are in or, simply DO NOT understand the gravity of the Department of Health, or DO NOT care... yet once again," said Woods

Woods warned a dysfunctional public health department puts citizens at tremendous risk in the event of a natural or man-made disaster. "Look at what happened during Hurricane Katrina. We didn't have the right people at the table and those at the table were either not qualified or grossly incompetent."

"I recommend that a county...if not state or national search be done to find qualified people who will be more suited to run the health department. I would ask the grand jury be brought in to question ALL current and former public health employees..."

--Dr. Maury Manligius, Acting Health Officer County of San Bernardino.