

S.B. County officials call fears of health agencies being dissolved baseless

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San Bernardino County officials denied the notion that the resignations of two top Department of Public Health officials foreshadow a plan to dissolve the agency.

Mark Uffer, San Bernardino County's chief administrative officer, said department employees have speculated that ultimately, the county-operated Arrowhead Regional Medical Center will absorb the Department of Public Health.

Uffer, a former chief administrator of the medical center, said there is a plan to centralize services provided by Arrowhead Regional and the county's public and behavioral health agencies in clinics across the county. All three would provide services at all of the county's clinics.

"Have you ever heard the saying, 'We have always done it that way'?" Uffer asked. "That's what we have here. There is no attempt by the county, no directives given, that Arrowhead Regional will take the centerpiece role."

No department employees have lost their jobs as a result of the integration, and patients have not been affected, said Jim Lindley, the Department of Public Health's interim director. Services would improve because patients would get all the services they need on the same day at the same place, he said.

Lindley was appointed after his predecessor, Margaret Smith, asked to return to her previous position in human resources. Dr. Maury Manliguis, interim county health officer, resigned Aug. 1. He replaced Dr. Margaret Beed, who resigned June 26.

Two critics, one being Manliguis, have blasted the county for appointing people who have no background in public health, including Lindley, as public health administrators. The appointments are undermining the department's ability to serve residents, Manliguis said in a July 30 letter to the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors.

No one from the San Bernardino Public Employees Association, the union that represents county workers, could be reached to determine whether other Department of Public Health employees have complained.

Diane Woods, president and CEO of the African American Health Institute of San Bernardino, said Uffer is risking public health by hiring unqualified people to run the department and mismanaging money. The institute is a nonprofit community organization focused on improving health care delivery.

The county's disease reports -- especially those for cancer and strokes -- would be better if the public health agency were using its money for prevention, as it is supposed to do, she said.

"This is putting the public at a disadvantage and at harm," Woods said. "We need to have a very good investigation of what's going on."

Uffer disputed Woods' claims.

"Not a single complaint or issue was brought forward until the most recent resignation," he said. "Unless she can give me a specific example of mismanagement, I can't speak to that."

No one has complained to county officials about the Department of Public Health's management, said county spokesman David Wert.

History of Concern

Fears about Arrowhead Regional Medical Center and its absorption of other county health services first manifested in 2004 after Uffer left the hospital to become the county chief administrative officer, Wert said. Some Department of Behavioral Health employees assumed that the hospital would take over the department, he said.

"None of that materialized," Wert said. "We didn't get a sense of that kind of fear at the Public Health Department until after Lindley went over there."

By law, the county Department of Public Health must provide many basic services, including disease surveillance, vector control and some prenatal services, Lindley said, adding that it cannot be absorbed by Arrowhead Regional Medical Center.

Lindley oversees the department's \$111 million budget, which pays for programs mandated by the state and federal governments and 1,100 employees. The public health officer is responsible for implementing the programs, he said.

"Forty-one out the state's 58 counties' public health departments are structured that way," Lindley said.

Integrated Health Care

San Bernardino County is one of a few statewide that have tried to merge county services, including those provided by public health, mental health and a hospital.

In San Bernardino County's pilot program, the agencies operate independently and do not share employees. County officials want to integrate all its clinics, which could take five years, Lindley said.

"We thought there were going to be less jobs," Lindley said. "Theoretically, we can't get there with less people."

Ideally, each clinic would have a single administrative staff to manage all three agencies' operations, but that could take years to do, Lindley said.

He said the plan is to create a county health agency that would include all its health-related departments, similar to one operated in San Luis Obispo County.

Riverside County's Community Health Agency, which includes its public health department, does not integrate services with the county Department of Mental Health and Riverside County Regional Medical Center in Moreno Valley.

However, Jeff Hamm, director of San Luis Obispo County's health agency, said his county still is struggling to integrate its behavioral and public health departments, an effort that started in earnest in 2005. The departments perform independently of each other and do not share office space, he said.

"That one-stop-shop notion of service, I think, is a little overstated," Hamm said. "The people who are in for drug and alcohol services are there for that. They don't want anything else."

Centrally located services would be more convenient for patients, Hamm said. But he is not convinced that it would save a significant amount of money, he added.

Staff writer Duane W. Gang contributed to this report.

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