

Reform is demanded

Minority leaders: It's a `health crisis'

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SAN BERNARDINO - Local black community and health leaders Friday criticized the County Public Health Department for incompetence and inattentiveness to what they called a minority health crisis.

"This situation is deeply disturbing," said Dr. A.J. Rogers, a surgeon and president of J.W. Vines Medical Society.

Rogers and other speakers at the African American Health Institute of San Bernardino County, at Community Hospital of San Bernardino, railed against a county public health system they said was incompetent, and unresponsive to the needs of minority and poor populations.

The county's top two doctors have opted to step down this year.

One, Health Officer Dr. Maury Manliguis, wrote a letter to the County Board of Supervisors criticizing the department's competency and philosophy and recommending a grand jury inquiry.

To many of the speakers at Friday's press conference, the whistle-blowing by a top doctor only reinforced what they said was already apparent.

"In our community, we have a health crisis," said Walter Hawkins, a member of activist group West Side Action Group. "We're not interested in their internal politics except in regard to how it affects us."

County spokesman David Wert said the department is stable and functioning well.

"It's patently false to contend that the departures of the last three (top) doctors are an indication that the department is failing to carry out its public health mission," Wert said.

Hawkins joined other speakers in blasting the Board of Supervisors for underfunding public health care, and doing too little to address high disease and mortality rates in the minority community.

Diane Woods of the African American Health Institute said the county's mismanagement of public health care required a "new model" for service delivery. Woods said an oversight commission with binding authority was needed, and added that the Board of

Supervisors should no longer be charged with funding and appointments for public health care positions.

Wert said top positions were mostly filled with professionals with medical backgrounds. He added that the department is often lauded for its work.

"Public health does a very good job running health programs aimed at specific minority communities," Wert said.

Some attendees openly suggested racism, saying the county has long ignored racial disparities in health care, and have improperly compiled data that illustrates the problem.

"Since the 1960s, African-Americans have steadily lost ground," said John Banks, a local newspaper advertising director. "We're dealing with outright racism."

In Manliguis' letter to the Board of Supervisors, he wrote that the department's delivery of services had begun to "erode and defeat the true purpose of what public health programs and this country's public health system were set up to be."

Hawkins echoed other speakers in saying the scrutiny was needed, but had come much too late and only after someone on the inside lobbed public complaints.

"Where was the outrage over the last 20 years while the public health system was deteriorating?" Hawkins said.

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