

HUMBOLDT-DEL NORTE COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY



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Humboldt County Board of Supervisors
825 Fifth Street
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Board of Supervisors,

Last spring, we wrote the Board expressing our concerns about the exodus of providers at Humboldt County Mental Health, and longer term chronic problems there. We are sending another letter because the lack of response from the Department of Mental Health, and the Director of DHSS to the crisis is discouraging. We have seen little in the way of definable progress. Most concerning are reports that the administration is not acknowledging the acuity and severity of the problem. Both public and private statements have been repeatedly made by the administration to the effect of "There is no crisis" and staff are "retiring." Initial administrative reaction to our prior letter was one of denial. Yes, a very expensive stop gap measure to use an outside company to staff Sempervirens was quickly put into place, however, it is still inadequately staffed. Outpatient services are a shell of what they used to be. And they have implemented some improvements - eg. better pay - to help recruitment and retention. None the less, more medical staff are leaving for reasons not directly related to pay or location. The culture is not changing.

We have reviewed the report on Organizational Analysis submitted to the Board last month. While it is helpful, and certainly outlines the complexity of the problems facing the Department of Health and Human Services, its findings are limited by the nature of the project. A broad based structural review of DHSS was/is clearly important, and some of the recommendations were reflective of the needs of the Department of Mental Health, its staff and its patients. Suggestions, such as combining the adult and child services under the Department of Mental Health make common sense. However, the specific concerns, which we addressed last spring, are only marginally addressed. Little was said about the Alcohol and Other Drugs program, and virtually nothing about coordination of services with Law Enforcement.

What was mentioned in the report as a "culture of fear" was not adequately described. We have received reports that it is a pervasive culture of bureaucratic indifference to the input of employees and the community that is toxic to relationships within the Department of Mental Health, and between the community and the Department. It starts, as described in the report, with a top down administrative style. And Humboldt County's top level administration does not seem to recognize the impact of that. While "top down", in the short run makes running a large organization (like the military) more simple for the leaders, it does not meet the needs of the staff nor the patients of Mental Health. Further, lack of funding often drives the need to impose solutions which make sense for the current budget, but do not provide for long term solutions for patients.

Comment is made in the report about the quality of the staff. We agree that they are hard working, conscientious people. It is not clear why they are not given more attention and authority. They have a lot

more to offer if supported and listened to. In particular, the Medical Staff has insufficient authority to direct patient centered care. In part, this is due to lack of adequate coordination and communication between the in patient and outpatient staff, and between HCMH and the community.

Further, there has been little in the way of enhanced communication and coordination with the Medical Community. There has not been any substantial progress on providing case management evaluation

services to the hospitals, even though there is good evidence that this will save the County money. There has been marginal coordination of services with providers of ACA Mental Health Services. And, our Ad Hoc Committee on the Mental Health, and Alcohol and other Drugs Crisis met once with the Director of Mental Health and the new Medical Director. They have not shown any interest in returning to talk with us.

We can strongly endorse the idea of a Blue Ribbon Panel, but we recommend such a panel be involved in the interviewing of prospects for a new director. Whoever is hired should know that the Panel carries weight with the Board of Supervisors, and that follow up meetings with the Panel will have the history of assertions by the director made before being hired.

There should be a Public Hearing on the state of Mental Health before the Board of Supervisors in the near future. This would be expected to last at least couple of hours with multiple witnesses representing the community. Our written comments do not convey the breath and depth of information and concern within the medical community, as well as with the community at large. That would take pages of written reports - and it is better to hear from the people making the reports in person. Open dialogue communicates far better than we have been able to in these letters both what we know and why we have reached these conclusions about this complex topic.

Finally, we suggest that the state of the Department of Mental Health should be investigated by the Grand Jury. They have subpoena powers, the means to provide a confidential setting to interview witnesses, and the ability to speak to the Public about long term problems and progress with Mental Health.

As noted in our prior letter, "We are fearful that this crisis will be similarly 'managed' and the opportunity to address the underlying issues will be lost." We remain more than willing to provide professional support to a commission, or help in any other way deemed appropriate.

Sincerely,



John Nelson, M.D.
President
Humboldt-Del Norte County Medical Society

*enc. Letter to Board of Supervisors, Drs. Christensen and Greenberg
Letter to Board of Supervisors, Dr. Edwalds
Letter to Board of Supervisors, Mad River Community Hospital*