

Sunday, May 17, 2020

TO: Mendocino County Board of Supervisors

FROM: James Flaherty, MD, Deputy Health Officer

RE: Pending Hiring of Joseph Iser, MD

Dear Supervisors Brown, Gjerde, Haschak, McCowen, and Williams:

I am concerned about the social media fed sentiment that hiring Dr. Iser is the wrong thing to do; under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, I believe that Mendocino County needs an experienced Public Health Officer, even if hiring one is a stop gap measure. Nevertheless, there is controversy and negative sentiment around the prospect of hiring him. I assume further inquiry by the County about the controversy has occurred, and you are close to making a decision about hiring him or not.

As we watch the destruction, fear and behavior caused or instigated by the pandemic as it unfolds locally, nationally, and globally, we are all convinced of the need for good public health and political leadership to steer a careful course over the over the looming uncertain months and years to come.

I have not met Dr. Iser, nor did I have any prior knowledge of him before he interviewed for our vacant and critical position of Public Health Officer. I was not involved in the interview process, but I have reviewed his resume carefully; it is very impressive. He has a wealth of county, regional, state, and national experience in delivery of patient-focused and large scale, disaster medical care, public health and communicable disease management, emergency response and management, and program administration; few physicians have this breadth of expertise and experience.

I have listened to him speak about his career experience, answer questions and challenges during our local radio interview on May 8th; in his answers, he seemed reasonable and straight-forward to me, and not defensive about the accusations leveled against him. Apart from the management controversies cited in the 3 minute news summary from October, it should be acknowledged that he is an applicant who is a subject matter expert in public health and has the credentials and experience to apply his knowledge and experience to management of the COVID pandemic in our County.

It is my opinion that the Board should give him fair consideration based more on his extensive knowledge, skills and abilities than on accusations and social media sentiment in response to those accusations. If you do decide to hire him, then the Department and Agency should carefully evaluate his leadership, decision-making, and effectiveness at three month intervals. I think it is important to fill our looming leadership void rather than wait for another qualified applicant, given the gravity of the ever-changing and long term pandemic situation at hand. My opinion may turn out to be wrong; if he is hired, time will tell.

Sig jf