



May 15, 2008

Dear friends and members of the Kanawha-Charleston Board of Health:

The events of the past several months have “gotten my attention” and convinced me that I am not the right person to lead the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department. Charleston/Kanawha County's peculiar combination of politics, personalities, and pathos requires someone with a different sense of priorities and propriety than I have. I have explored options across the country (from Virginia to Washington State) and I have concluded that there are other systems in which I can better do my lifework of helping a population of people achieve wellbeing for themselves.

I am resigning as your Health Officer effective July 10, 2008, although as of today I have not secured another position. Please understand that this is not a negotiating ploy; it is a final decision. After that date you will need a health officer, a physician with thorough knowledge of and experience with public health practice. Your search may be protracted; you will need someone to serve on an interim basis. I do hope for a smooth transition, but your choices will be limited; I can't offer you much help, because I am reluctant to recommend that a colleague step into such an unsettled situation. Please find someone who understands the imperative for the Board to assert its independence and maintain its integrity as champion of the public's health. I hope you can find someone who will continue my advocacy, first and foremost, for meeting the needs of the people we serve.

You have a number of questions before you, some of which are important and some which only seem so. The question is not, “Can we make this work?”, but “Will doing this improve our ability to fulfill our mission?” The question is not, “How much of the proceeds from the sale of our present building should go into any new facility?”, because the answer is, “All of it.” In the 1970s Federal money was obtained specifically to build the present site; this investment was intended for the benefit of all citizens of Kanawha County through public health programs. Any reinvestment should do the same. Finally, the question is not, “How can we please the politicians?”, but “How can we advance the public's health?” Please base your public health decisions on what is right; don't be threatened or intimidated into compromising the Board's integrity.

I leave you with a local health department that is not only financially sound but poised to adapt to the future; in fact it has already adapted with the addition of two new divisions, Epidemiology/Threat Preparedness and Health Promotion. The department now has solid administrative policies, a budget, a strategic plan, and a "dashboard" of performance indicators. I leave you with a department that has a seasoned, capable leadership team. The success of WalkItUp! shows that I leave you with a health department that is better integrated with our community and that has a large reservoir of public goodwill. I believe that you all understand how many good things have happened in the past five years. I hope you will continue these programs, and I hope you will continue to treat the staff with the respect they deserve. You need them.

When considering what the public wants and needs from public health, ask the public. Listen to them -- there is wisdom there. When you are unsure about some aspect of public health, ask your KCHD staff. Listen to them -- they know. Some of you yourselves have served the public through the Board of Health for more than two decades; please don't discard that knowledge and experience.

The Bible tells us the story of Jacob and Esau. Esau, you remember, sold his birthright for a bowl of stew; in other words, he threw away his future prosperity for a trivial present benefit. In the New Testament we are reminded that he couldn't get that blessing back again, no matter how much he cried. Remember this wisdom as you make the decisions that will affect KCHD for years.

I appreciate the chance I've had to work with Dr. Artz and with you all. I pray the best for the people of Kanawha County and Charleston: they deserve and need the best public health service possible. I urge you and others possessing leadership here -- those the people have chosen for power and those who have chosen power for themselves -- never to forget that your people suffer from much that could be prevented.

*Quod scripio scripio,*



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