



May 11, 2020

Governor Stitt,

It has been an honor to serve as your Commissioner of Health over the past 8 months. There is no doubt that my 50 years of experience working in, leading, and teaching public health has prepared me for and served our state well during the critical response that has saved so many lives during COVID-19. It is unfortunate that I will be unable to lead the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) on the trajectory we have collectively set to improve the health of Oklahomans and launch our state into the top ten in health.

When accepting this honor, I understood the challenges that this department has faced for the better part of the last two decades, and as a recognized leader within our state and across the nation I have worked to lead departments through times of uncertainty and significant change. I felt compelled to take on this new challenge for the good of all Oklahomans. There was great risk, but also great opportunity, and I am pleased to share that in a span of 8 months we have been able to significantly improve the agency's reach and impact in the communities we serve, all while responding proactively and aggressively to contain the spread of COVID-19. Many lives of Oklahomans have been saved with the collective effort of all Oklahomans.

The commitment I made to listening and gathering feedback from our staff and the communities we collectively serve unknowingly prepared us for the pandemic we are now facing. As a result of rapid change and transition in the few months leading up to the COVID-19 response, the following has been realized:

- I learned from our frontline the need and desire to do more for our communities, and also concern that everything would simply continue as it always had.
- We leaned further into the communities, committed to breaking the status quo, and made strategic decisions in the first few months of my tenure that unknowingly prepared us for our agile and proactive response to COVID-19 in Oklahoma including:
  - Increased services at county health departments by 4% in just a few months before diverting resources to our COVID-19 response;
  - Increased investments in existing nursing and other critical frontline staff positions for enhanced recruitment and retention of top talent that have been critical for COVID-19 response;
  - Realignment of many central office resources to better fund and support local public health efforts; and
  - \$9M in efficiencies identified in the first few weeks on the job which allowed the OSDH to have cash flow to initially respond to the pandemic.

Our COVID-19 response specifically includes:

- Increased staffing and resources at county health departments to support COVID-19 response;
- Increased investments in existing nursing and other critical frontline staff positions for enhanced recruitment and retention of top talent;
- Partnering closely with our county health departments and healthcare systems, to quickly stand up over 80 drive through and mobile testing options for all Oklahomans, emphasizing communities suffering from disparate health outcomes and access;
- Enhanced data transparency to provide much needed information to guide your decision-making, and give our constituents real-time data and peace of mind;
- Accelerated the transition from antiquated data systems to more agile and nimble solutions, enhancing how we tailor programs, services and outreach to the unique communities we serve;



- Creation of hospital plans and guidance to assist in the phased reopening's of our economy;
- Actions taken with nursing homes to contain and mitigate loss of life;
- Recruited OUs Chair of Occupational & Environmental Health to oversee quality control of PPE;
- Recruited doctorate prepared epidemiologist for additional support;
- Recruited retired Senior Associate Dean from College of Public Health & President Professor of Environmental Health for response strategic planning;
- Development of 11 strike teams to aggressively deploy to long term care facilities with outbreaks; and
- Training and deployment of 500 contact tracers to contain cluster of cases as Oklahoma reopens.

COVID-19 has demonstrated clearly that a strong public health infrastructure is even more critical when we are not in a pandemic response, to ensure we are operating effectively and efficiently with a strong, competent workforce and network of public and private partners in place to prevent and promote health across our state. I am confident we are leaving the department positioned better than when I began. I have no doubt you will continue this level of excellence that our teams have brought forth, but feel compelled to emphasize the importance of continuity during a pandemic and the critical importance to continued safety and well-being of all Oklahomans.

Since my term will expire in the midst of the largest health crisis in one hundred years, I want to make known the risks associated with leaving critical gaps in both leadership and infrastructure that if not considered and addressed will compromise the good work and efforts of all Oklahomans to contain the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. These include:

- Modernizing and build out of the public health lab;
- Strengthening of emergency preparedness response efforts;
- Selection of a doctoral prepared state epidemiologist;
- Recruiting and retaining critical leadership positions through the entirety of the response to ensure access to appropriate expertise and public health capacity;
- Continued focus on data systems for critical and timely reporting as well as the launch of an electronic health record in all 68 county health departments to support expanded sentinel and syndromic surveillance and ongoing contact tracing efforts; and
- Continued engagement with universities to support expansion of telehealth and other virtual health options for COVID-19 response and beyond.

The following are initiatives that we have begun and suggest should be continued:

- Development of electronic health record for OSDH and launch of statewide health information exchange for real time health data sharing;
- Deployment of 9 mobile clinics for each public health region for accessibility of services;
- Development of one stop shop health hubs in all 68 county health department including integrated services in public health, mental health and primary care;
- Continued development of public and private partnerships to create access to a multitude of services in all areas of our state focused on meeting the underlying needs of our communities;
- Increased investments in county health department human and capital resources to continue to bring expanded programs and services directly to the community; and
- Continued exploration and commitment to leverage partnerships and relationships with other state agencies to improve service to our communities.

While I respect the Legislature's authority to either accept or deny a candidate you put forward, I am disheartened and saddened that a leader with over 50 years of service to the state, recognized national leader



in public health, former president of the National Association for County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), visiting Associate Professor of Health Administration and Policy at Hudson College of Public Health for 17 years, possession of a doctorate level degree, National Institute for Public Health trained and a proven track record for delivering on progressive and innovative public health strategies is deemed unqualified. It is even more unfortunate that the timing of this is occurring in the midst of a pandemic.

I thank you for your faith in me, my leadership and the team that we have built at the Oklahoma State Department of Health. I am grateful to the men and women who every day show up, committed to the vision we have collectively set for our great state, focused on improving the communities they live and work in. I am excited and hopeful that the vision you have for Oklahoma will continue to charge forward, even in my absence. Thank you for this opportunity and honor.

Sincerely,

Gary Cox, JD

Cc: Jerome Loughridge, Secretary of Health & Mental Health

John Budd, Chief Operating Officer