

Response to Grand Jury Report

READ AND CONSIDERED

DATE 9.5.17 BY Ballenger

FILED SUPERIOR COURT OF CALIFORNIA COUNTY OF SONOMA

SEP 18 2017

**Report Title:** Environmental Health and Safety: *Keeping it Safe for Snoopy and All His Friends*

**Report Date:** June 15, 2017

**Response By:** Barbie Robinson      **Title:** Health Services, Director  
 Ellen Bauer                              **Title:** Health Services, Public Health Division Director  
 Christine Sosko                         **Title:** Health Services, Director of Environmental Health

**Agency:** Sonoma County Department of Health Services

**FINDINGS**

**F1. Environmental Health and Safety is understaffed, especially in middle management positions, which reduces the ability to effectively train less experienced staff.**

We agree with finding numbered F1.

**Response:** The difficulty in recruiting and hiring Registered Environmental Health Specialists who meet minimum qualifications at all classification levels has led to understaffing and ongoing vacancies. See response to R1 regarding efforts to fill vacant positions.

**F2. The practice of "under-filling" leaves Environmental Health and Safety dependent on trainees, which leads to a less effective organization.**

We disagree partially with finding numbered F2.

**Response:** There is a systemic, statewide challenge in filling fully certified Registered Environmental Health Specialist positions, particularly at the more advanced and experienced level. This issue is coupled with the cost of living in Sonoma County. These issues lead to inherent recruitment difficulties. "Under-filling" is a hiring strategy which means you fill a position with a lower level job classification in the classification series. The concept is that you then develop the lower level employee to eventually be qualified for the more advanced work. Therefore, the Department of Health Services has found it necessary to use the strategy to hire at the trainee classification and provide the requisite education and in-field training necessary to obtain full certification. While this practice requires additional investment and time on the part of the Department, the education, in-field training, and regulatory education provided, creates great opportunities for trainees to enter into the profession. The Department has found the investment in employee development provides long-term gain and leads to a better chance of retaining the employee due to support of their development.

**F3. The vacant supervising position of "Community Engagement and Training" underscores two of the greatest needs of the section: outreach to the community and robust ongoing training.**

We agree with finding numbered F3.

**Response:** The vacant supervisory position is a Registered Environmental Health Specialist certified position; therefore, the Department struggles with the same type of recruitment challenges. The Department is recruiting for a Program Planning and Evaluation Analyst to assist with some of the outreach and community engagement needs within the section. In addition to supervising line Registered Environmental Health Specialist certified positions, one of the vacant supervisory positions also provides customer service and supervision of the front office team.

**F4. Environmental Health and Safety is limited to recruiting qualified personnel from outside the County or training individuals who do not currently possess Registered Environmental Health Specialists certification on the job, because curriculum supporting Registered Environmental Health Specialists certification does not exist in northern California.**

We agree with finding numbered F4.

**Response:** Statewide, there are six schools located in southern and central California that provide the distinct Registered Environmental Health Specialists program (Option V) curriculum and accreditation. They include California State University Fresno, California State University Northridge, California State University San Bernardino, California State University San Diego, Loma Linda University, and University of California Los Angeles.

The graduates of an Option V program are immediately eligible for entrance to the State Environmental Health Specialist Registration exam and if they pass, are able to forego the in-field training requirement for the Registered Environmental Health Specialist certification, minimizing the length of in-field training time and maximizing efficiency. Without an Option V curriculum in the northern California area, exposure to the Registered Environmental Health Specialist profession is limited, but it does not mean that qualified candidates are not available more locally. Currently, California State University East Bay is working towards gaining the Option V accreditation, with plans to open the program in 2018/2019. Once this program is established, Sonoma County would have the opportunity to provide internships and begin early recruitments with California State University East Bay students.

The California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health is aware of the hiring challenges and has developed a subcommittee to work on promoting the Registered Environmental Health Specialist profession and establish more northern California Option V schools and internship program opportunities.

**F5. Sonoma State University has an existing Environmental Studies Department that could provide courses necessary to obtaining Registered Environmental Health Specialists certification.**

We disagree wholly or partially with finding numbered F5.

**Response:** It is true that Sonoma State University has an Environmental Studies Department that may offer courses that are relevant to a Registered Environmental Health Specialists certification, however, Sonoma State University will need to build a Registered Environmental Health Specialists program curriculum and apply and receive the Option V certification prior to providing the course work necessary for graduates to sit for the Registered Environmental Health Specialists exam.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**R1. The Director of Environmental Health Services, Division Director, Department Director, and Human Resources Analyst should develop a plan to fill currently vacant positions no later than December 31, 2017 and provide that plan to the 2017/2018 Civil Grand Jury.**

This recommendation will be implemented.

**Response:** At the time of this written response, the Environmental Health and Safety Section within the Department of Health Services has eight vacant positions (two Supervising Registered Environmental Health Specialists, two Senior Registered Environmental Health Specialists, one Program Planning and Evaluation Analyst, and three Registered Environmental Health Specialist trainee I/II positions). The Department has worked with County Human Resources Department to develop recruitment plans for each vacant position and will continue to work with County Human Resources Department to fill future vacancies in an effort to fill positions as quickly as possible. The recruitment advertising plans have been and will be aggressive in order to ensure qualified individuals are aware of these recruitments and the benefits of working for the County of Sonoma. All recruitment to fill the above mentioned vacancies are currently open. Due to competition among California counties for Supervising and Senior Registered Environmental Health Specialist positions, we are aware that these will be the most challenging positions to fill. The Department will provide an update on the success of the above stated recruitment plans to the Civil Grand Jury by December 31, 2017.

**R2. The Director of the Public Health Division should meet with the Sonoma State University's Chair of the Environmental Studies Department to recommend a curriculum that would lead directly to Registered Environmental Health Specialists certification no later than December 31, 2017.**

This recommendation not yet implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

**Response:** The Department of Health Services Director, Public Health Director, and Director of Environmental Health will request an initial meeting with Sonoma State University President Judy Sakaki to review opportunities for collaboration on workforce needs across the Department and to request her support to pursue a conversation with the Environmental Studies Department regarding Registered Environmental Health Specialist certification. Public Health and Environmental Health and Safety Directors will request to meet with Environmental Studies chair to recommend possible steps Sonoma State University could take to offer the Registered Environmental Health Specialist program (Option V) curriculum at Sonoma State University and increase awareness about the Registered Environmental Health Specialist profession for Sonoma State University students.