

Health and Human Services Committee
Confirmation Hearing – Joe Acierno
January 30, 2015

Joseph Acierno, MD, JD, Director
DHHS Division of Public Health

Good afternoon Sen. Campbell and members of the HHS Committee. I'm Dr. Joseph Acierno (J-O-S-E-P-H A-C-I-E-R-N-O). I'm Chief Medical Officer and Director of the Division of Public Health for the Department of Health and Human Services and currently serving as acting CEO for the agency. I've served as Chief Medical Officer and Director since March 8, 2013.

Serving Nebraskans is an honor and a privilege. I'm excited about the work we're doing in public health to help people live healthier lives.

Public health played a critical role in the opening of the Biocontainment Unit in Omaha and the planning and coordination to get Ebola patients there.

The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and Nebraska Medicine have been partners in preparedness for more than 10 years. Building the unit was a joint effort and so was the decision to open it at the request of the U.S. State Department back in September.

The decision required careful consideration. Ebola itself was not new to us but having Ebola patients on U.S. and Nebraska soil was. This was about more than treating patients. This decision impacted everyone in the state. We knew the highly-trained staff at Nebraska Medicine could safely treat patients while protecting the public and that the risk to Omaha and greater Nebraska was minimal.

There was also a high-level of coordination and planning to transport patients. It was a multi-jurisdictional, multi-agency effort – DHHS, Nebraska Medicine, State Patrol, Douglas County Health Department, local law enforcement, fire and EMS. Things ran smoothly because key players had planned, trained and exercised together as part of preparedness planning.

Our goal is to protect Nebraskans and that's why in response to Ebola, we've also:

- Enhanced our response plans.
- Continued to evaluate our hospitals' readiness.
- Shared updated guidance with local health departments, health care providers, hospitals, local labs and the state lab through our extensive Health Alert Network.
- Monitored travelers from West Africa for signs and symptoms of Ebola.

- Updated our website with numerous resources to help people sort out fact from fiction and simplify the science.
- Activated our Emergency Coordination Center as a central clearing house for Ebola-related information and guidance and to help connect preparedness resources to those who need them statewide.

DHHS, the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency, local health departments and other local, state and federal agencies have responded to tornadoes, wildfires, flooding, ice storms, and disease and foodborne illness outbreaks.

Preparedness planning and response never stops and it continues to be a priority.

Another priority in public health is our State Health Improvement Plan.

Nebraska's plan, released in 2013, provides a roadmap for the future of public health. The plan focuses on several priority issues including reducing heart disease, stroke and cancer, strengthening and expanding health promotion programs in the state, and enhancing the integration of public health, behavioral health, environmental health and health care services.

The goal is to help people, families, communities and public health agencies work together to improve the health and quality of life for all Nebraskans.

Public health accreditation is another important effort. It's a voluntary process with an overarching goal – to improve and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance of Tribal, state, local and territorial public health departments.

Accreditation provides valuable feedback to health departments on strengths and weaknesses, provides increased credibility, enhances visibility and accountability and provides an opportunity to improve quality and performance of various programs.

We've completed three prerequisites: State Health Needs Assessment, State Health Improvement Plan and a Division Strategic Plan and submitted a letter of intent in September 2014.

Wellness is something that affects every Nebraskan. Public Health has worked hard to promote a culture of wellness across the state. Embracing a healthy lifestyle early on through physical activity, good nutrition, preventive screenings and stress management leads to better health outcomes later in life.

We know worksite wellness programs make sense. Americans spend around 36 percent of their total waking hours at work, and that makes workplaces prime venues for promoting and supporting healthy lifestyles.

DHHS created an online Worksite Wellness Toolkit. It's a resource for Nebraska businesses interested in employee wellness. The toolkit is free and takes a step-by-step approach to help employers start or expand wellness programs and it showcases our continued commitment to wellness in Nebraska.

The Division of Public Health is also committed to ensuring Nebraskans receive safe, effective, quality care. As Chief Medical Officer, by statute, I'm charged with the role of disciplining health care providers. My goal is to be consistent and fair with licensees and discipline. Nebraskans should be cared for safely and health care providers treated fairly. If there's a problem with a facility or provider, the public can trust that we will investigate and remedy the issue based on our findings. When it comes to discipline, licensees should understand what we're doing and why, and that all our actions are consistent with the laws.

Public health is unique in a sense ... sometimes success can be measured in what doesn't happen. When you don't hear about us because people have clean air and water, less disease, quality care at safe health care facilities, healthy schools, communities and workplaces ... we're getting the job done and that's success in public health.

Our successes wouldn't be possible without the work of our employees. I feel extremely fortunate to work with such a talented and dedicated staff.

For those of you I haven't met yet, let me wrap up by sharing just a little bit about my background.

Before becoming Director and Chief Medical Officer in March, I had served as Deputy Chief Medical Officer since 2007 and was legal counsel to the department prior to that.

I'm a physician and a lawyer. This combination makes me well-suited for the work I do at DHHS which has both community health and regulatory sides.

I received my medical degree and law degree as well as my undergraduate degree from Creighton University. I was an emergency department physician while attending law school and later practiced medical-legal law in Los Angeles and Omaha before joining the department.

I appreciate your commitment to the health of Nebraskans. The division has been a resource for you on community health and general personal health issues and we're happy to help.

I'm grateful to have the opportunity to continue to move public health forward in Nebraska.

Thank you for your time and I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.