

Health and Human Services Committee
May 9, 2013

Joseph Acierno, MD, JD

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. I was appointed and started the position on March 8.

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

I'd like to share a little bit about my background and then I'll talk about my vision for the division.

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. I didn't hand in one degree to get another. I consider what I do the practice of medicine – I just do it differently. 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've been married to my wife JoAnn for 26 years. She's an Associate Professor of Nursing at Clarkson College and I have two grown children – Michael who's an Aerospace Engineer in Ohio and Michelle who's a fourth year veterinary student at the University of Pennsylvania and we share our home with 12-year-old Westie named Riley.

I hit the ground running and spent the last several weeks gaining insight into the breadth of the division and what successes we can continue to build on as we move public health forward in Nebraska.

I worked side-by-side by my predecessor Dr. Joann Schaefer for six years. I have the utmost respect for her. She is my colleague but I'm also proud to call her a friend. She had a mighty vision, accomplished much and left a solid foundation.

One success is wellness. Wellness is something that affects every Nebraskan. We've worked hard to help create a culture of wellness in the state. We know embracing a healthy lifestyle

early on through physical activity, good nutrition, preventive screenings and stress management leads to better health outcomes later in life.

Wellness affects all people and it also crosses divisions at DHHS. I look forward to working with my fellow directors in Behavioral Health and Children and Family Services. We're all trying to hit the same target but we're using different arrows to get there. We know the power of one can be strengthened by the power of many. Our goal is to cut across silos and work together to make a collective impact and change lives for the better.

Another is preparedness – a lot has changed since Sept. 11, 2001. As a state, we're more prepared now than ever before. Every county in Nebraska is covered by a local health department thanks to LB 692, the Nebraska Health Care Funding Act, passed in 2001.

Those local health departments played a critical role in the response to the H1N1 influenza pandemic. Health officials undertook one of the fastest and largest vaccination campaigns in history vaccinating more than 475,000 Nebraskans and saving lives. I'm a member of our public health emergency response team and preparedness planning never stops and it will continue to be one of my priorities.

Another success to build upon ... is taking advantage of latest technology to make processes like getting professional licenses, birth or death certificates or immunization records electronic ... making government more user-friendly and more accessible to the people especially outside of normal working hours. We will continue to look for ways to use technology to make our processes seamless, responsive and timely.

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 but there must be confidence in the system. Nebraskans should receive safe, effective, quality care and 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. I may be the face of public health but they are truly the heart and soul.

I also appreciate your commitment to the health of Nebraskans. We've done a good job working together over the years on things like scope of practice and licensing new professions.

And, the division has been a resource for you on community health and general personal health issues.

In the months to come, I will be traveling with my deputies around the state to get input from staff, partners and the local health departments on what we're doing well ... what we can build on and if we're not doing something well, what can we do to improve.

I'm excited about the work we've already done, what we're doing now, and where the future will take us.

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