

MOVING ON

Randy Snowden to retire from county health agency

Tenure marked by flaps, achievements



14 HOURS AGO • [PETER JENSEN](#)

If there's anyone in the Napa County government who knows the meaning of the truism "out of the frying pan, into the fire," it's Randy Snowden, the director of the county's Health and Human Services Agency.

Snowden, who's retiring at the end of September, became the director in 2005, when the agency was grappling with federal regulators on getting it into compliance. Failure to do so could have risked losing millions of dollars in federal funding.

After an organizational overhaul, the agency achieved compliance, only to get hit by the worst economic recession the U.S. has seen in decades.

With the state government cutting health and human services funding to balance its budget, Snowden said he had to sit down with other agency leaders twice a year and determine where to cut the budget without doing too much damage to programs thousands of Napa County residents rely

on.

"The first couple of years, it was all about compliance and finishing that work," Snowden said. "That was a big drag, but we had to make it so the agency was safe. Then we just got blindsided by the recession. The whole agenda was completely ambushed."

On top of that, Snowden was instrumental in a controversial move to take the county's ambulance contract from Piner's and give it to American Medical Response in 2011.

"Never underestimate the potential controversy of an ambulance franchise procurement," Snowden said, reciting his list of lessons he's taken from the job.

This year, he's been working to prepare HHSA for implementation of federal health care reform, which will expand health insurance coverage to cover 15,000 low-income county residents in 2014.

As if Snowden's plate wasn't full enough already, the agency is also planning to relocate to the former Dey Labs campus on Napa Valley Corporate Drive.

Snowden, 63, said he considered staying on as director to see health care reform and the agency's move completed, but those are multi-year commitments.

"The way I put it to the board was, 'If I were a dog, a lot of me wants to stay in the hunt,'" Snowden said. "The decider for me is both of those are multi-year initiatives. I just don't believe in reincarnation."

A life of retirement and running his family's wine business with his brother, retired Napa County Judge Scott Snowden, seemed more appealing, Snowden said.

Snowden was a business lawyer for Coombs and Dunlap, but entered the world of health care when he helped start a drug rehabilitation program for teenagers in Oakland. He saw a fit for himself, and eventually moved on to be in charge of adult services for Health and Human Services in 1997.

"It's a great program," Snowden said. "It was so interesting. A child that becomes a drug addict at age 10 — what is it about helping that person that isn't good?"

Looking back on his tenure as director, Snowden said he was pleased to see HHSA get through the recession without the deep cuts other county health agencies have seen in California.

He attributed that to the Napa County Board of Supervisors believing in the agency's mission, and being willing to cut it checks during the annual budget process. Other health agencies suffered worse fates, he said.

"I half jokingly said to someone, 'My tombstone will read: It could have been a lot worse,'" Snowden said. "It was sort of like preventing worse stuff from happening."

He said HHSA is also blessed to get financial support from Napa Valley's wine industry, including grants from Auction Napa Valley and the Gasser Foundation, and donations from individual benefactors. That fact has always been a source of jealousy from other counties' health directors, Snowden said.

"There are plenty of counties that don't have any of those," he said. "It makes it completely different. It's an amazing place."

On federal health care reform, Snowden said he believes it to be a great concept, but its biggest test will be its rollout at the state level. That's been difficult in California counties, which have been waiting for the state to decide which computer programs it's going to use, or how to design some benefit packages, Snowden said.

"Health care reform is a great concept and at the big picture level, I think it has a lot of good components," Snowden said. "The biggest concern for me is at the state level. They're the ones who are designing a lot of the details of how it's going to play out in a place like Napa."

He also favors being able to consolidate the agency into one location in the move to Dey Labs. It's spread out over three locations currently, which can be difficult for some residents without a car, he said.

"You have to get to three different places that are a couple of miles from each other and that doesn't make sense," Snowden said. "It's not convenient."

But those tasks will be for the next Health and Human Services director. For Snowden, retirement — and the family wine business — awaits.

“My brother and I both had really intense, time-consuming jobs,” Snowden said. “We have somewhat neglected our family business. We’re starting to have grandkids — that seems to be a fairly big deal. I’m just not getting any younger.”