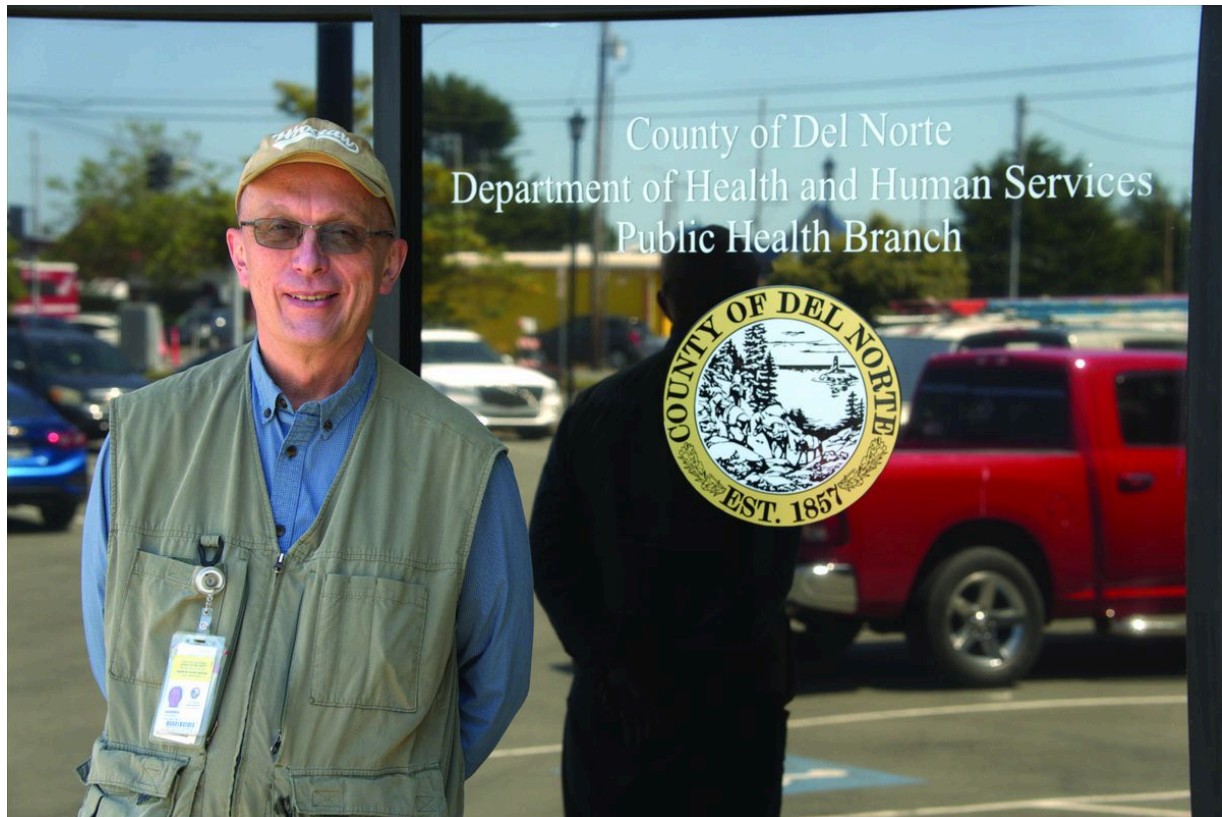


Rehwaldt to step down as public health authority

June 5, 2021



Dr. Warren Rehwaldt announced he will be stepping down from his post as public health officer during a May 25 Del Norte County board of supervisors meeting.

“I made a promise to myself and my wife that I would be getting out of public health, I made that promise over a year and a half ago, and I finally have to keep it,” said Rehwaldt during the meeting.

Now, after guiding the county through the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rehwaldt said it was time to hang up his public health hat. He reflected on his career in public health, including the last year and a half, in an interview with the TriPLICATE

Rehwaldt began his medical career at the United Indian Health Services, working as UIHS’ first full-time physician from 1992-1997. In 2001, he became the public health officer in Del Norte County, also serving as staff physician at Del Norte Community Health Center. In 2005, Rehwaldt stepped down as county public health officer, but took the job again in 2013, where he has served until now.

Rehwaldt said the public health officer position has changed significantly since the beginning of pandemic. Among the changes, the job is now full-time, and public health has become truly a public facing one.

“I’ve been on the radio now every week for a year, talking about COVID,” said Rehwaldt. “The public relations end of it expanded dramatically, it was never like that before, most people didn’t know who I was... they know now, and they understand what we are supposed to do in situations like this.”

Despite the hardships associated with the pandemic, Rehwaldt said he feels medical and public health workers are better prepared for future emergencies.

“There’s been a lot of planning for emergency response, that includes public health, for years, but until you actually live events and actually do the work of responding, you don’t really learn how good your planning is,” said Rehwaldt. “Every pathogen creates its own signature, but if you have the general concept of what needs to happen in a response...that’s the key thing.”

Additionally, Rehwaldt said public health has evolved over the years to respond to other emergencies, not just pandemics. For instance, public health in Del Norte County is now prepared to respond to an event such as the 2011 tsunami.

With vaccine distribution moving to the forefront in the battle against COVID-19, Rehwaldt said vaccine hesitancy among county residents is a touch higher than he initially predicted.

So far, 61.7% of Del Norte residents over 65 are fully vaccinated, according to the state’s vaccine tracker.

“We were pretty convinced that we weren’t going to get everybody to get vaccinated... Our biggest concern was with our seniors, and we were really hoping to get a somewhat higher vaccination rate with our seniors,” said Rehwaldt.

Nevertheless, Rehwaldt is hopeful vaccination rates will slowly climb over time.

Rehwaldt will officially vacate the position as of June 30. As the county scouts for a new public health officer, deputy public health officer Dr. Palak Patel will step into the role.