

DISTRICT TWELVE MEDICAL EXAMINER

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Barbara C. Wolf, M.D.
Member, Florida Medical Examiner Commission
District 5 Medical Examiner
809 Pine Street
Leesburg, Florida 34748

May 19, 2022

Dear Barbara,

As you know, I have served as District Medical Examiner for the 12th District (Sarasota-Bradenton-Arcadia) since 2003, and my district borders District 22 (Charlotte County). Now that Dr. Imami has announced his pending retirement, I am interested in taking on those duties. We have been cross-covering for Dr. Imami pretty consistently for the last several years, including extensive coverage over these last several months, so I have a pretty good feel for the staff there and the way the office runs. Because of this experience, as well as our physical proximity, I think I could take over the duties as DME for D22 while still maintaining my role as DME here in D12 and provide excellent service to both districts, and without significant disruption to the function of either office. Were I given that opportunity, I would certainly have some ideas of how I would run the office, but I would like to make it clear that I would be flexible in my approach to working with the Charlotte County Board and Administration and all of the local agencies. Since the office functions reasonably well, I would not be looking to make immediate wholesale change to office staff, policies, or facilities – my approach, as I took when I started in Sarasota, would be to make incremental changes to reflect my philosophy on running a medical examiner office. That being said, here are some of my initial thoughts, most of which would be addressed right at the beginning:

1. I would not want to “absorb” the D22 office into D12. I would keep the two districts fiscally, administratively, and geographically separate. I currently have my PA, an S-corporation through which I operate the D12 office, and my first thought is that, for efficiency, I would run the D22 finances through that corporation, with strict accounting practices to keep the finances of the two districts separate. With further education from my accountant or others on the issues at play here, I might easily change my mind on this, especially if Charlotte County administration has a

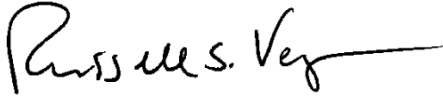
preference. Thus, I would entertain making the current D22 staff either employees of my PA or employees of a new business entity. I use Paychex for payroll, retirement, and health insurance of my current D12 staff. For simplicity, I would try to integrate the D22 staff into this same program. Again, I am open to whatever preferences Charlotte County administration might have.

2. I do not have any desire to abandon the building on Paulson Road and bring those cases up to Sarasota. I would envision keeping ALL of the operation in place at that location. The building appears to be in good shape and it is of sufficient size to do the case work for the short or medium term. There are clearly some issues that need to be addressed in the long term (office space for additional staff (see below), expansion of body storage capacity, and repurposing of the long unused laboratory space) but I would try to use the existing building and site to address these issues rather than explore moving.
3. This has traditionally been a one-doctor office, and current caseloads do not really support a Chief Medical Examiner AND a full time associate medical examiner. Yet it is a reasonable full load for one person who is also taking on the duties of being chief. And part-time medical examiners are generally not to be found. Thus having a one-man shop means you need to pay a locum tenens ME to cover for you when you are away and to relieve caseloads when busy. While the budget currently includes significant funding for this, recent changes in the ME job market have led to steep increases in the cost of locums coverage, and this budget item would be expected to rise considerably. My approach to this issue would be that my D12 associates and I would all officially be MEs for both Districts. We would cover the D22 caseload on a rotating basis, so that one of us would consistently be on site at D22. While this would require me to hire an additional associate medical examiner, I can probably do that with the available medical examiner salary funds in the current budget and still save some money over current budget allocations. I believe the current staff have enjoyed working with us and would look quite favorably on this continued relationship.
4. To supervise the office, I would plan on being in Port Charlotte for two days a week and in Sarasota for three days a week, or maybe go back and forth on some days, but of course always be available by phone or Zoom to handle any issues that might arise in-between. If not me, one of us (pathologists) would be in the office just about every day.
5. The current staff work hard and are good at their jobs. In this job market, and with the specific skills required for their jobs, it is critical to keep the staff that are currently in place. I would do everything I can to make sure that happens, including working with the budget to improve pay and benefits. In addition, the current staffing levels are insufficient. At least one additional administrative assistant and one other investigator/technician will probably be required. And if Les Husbands retires shortly, as he is likely to do, that will mean finding an additional technician/investigator.
6. The technology in the office needs updating – for instance they have no database or information management system. I would envision either expanding the database that I currently use to include the D22 casework, with the clear expectation that we keep the cases in the two districts separate; or I would try to piggyback the software licensing so as to provide a distinct but parallel database for D22 at a reasonable cost.

For additional context, I have no plans to retire any time soon (though I know I will not be able to match Dr. Imami's long tenure as Chief ME!).

Of course, there would be more involved than the basics I have outlined here, but I hope this gives you and the rest of the search committee members an idea of how I would operate if given the opportunity to be the Chief Medical Examiner for District 22. Also, please be aware that if the committee decides to go in a different direction, I am available and happy to serve as interim DME if necessary until a full-time DME is appointed.

Thanks for your consideration,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Russell S. Vega". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Russell S. Vega, MD
Chief Medical Examiner
District Twelve of Florida