

Minutes of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee
4 p.m., October 18, 2022 – Meeting Room next to the State Attorney’s Office
Charlotte County Justice Center, 350 East Marion Avenue, Punta Gorda, Florida

Members Present

State Attorney Amira Fox, 20th Judicial Circuit
Commissioner Chris Constance, Charlotte County Board of County Commissioners
The Honorable Ken Roberson, Roberson Funeral Homes
Dr. Joseph Ravid, Gulfview Medical Institute
Chief Deputy Michael Casarella, Charlotte County Sheriff’s Office (proxy for Charlotte County Sheriff Bill Prummell)
Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24 (via zoom phone)
The Honorable Kathy Smith, Public Defender, 20th Judicial Circuit (via zoom)

Others Present

Janette Knowlton, Charlotte County Attorney
Assistant State Attorney Shannon Doolity, Charlotte County Office Head
Samantha Syoen, State Attorney’s Office Communications Director
Chief Investigator J Purdy, State Attorney’s Office
Investigator Phil Marotta, State Attorney’s Office
Leandro Navarro, State Attorney’s Office I.T. Specialist

Meeting Commenced at 4:05 p.m.

The fourth meeting of the District 22 Medical Examiner Search Committee was called to order by State Attorney Amira Fox, 20th Judicial Circuit. A roll call was done by members of the committee at the request of State Attorney Fox. Committee member, Dr. Barbara Wolf, Medical Examiner, Districts 5 & 24, joined via Zoom call, Public Defender Kathy Smith appeared via Zoom. There was an in-person quorum. State Attorney Fox also announced the other attendees present, as noted in the list above.

State Attorney Fox provided updates since the last meeting about Dr. Imami. He evacuated during the hurricane to the other coast and Dr. Russell S. Vega, Chief Medical Examiner District Twelve of Florida handled the case load. Dr. Imami formally retired on October 5, 2022, after decades of dedicated service to the community. State Attorney Fox, as authorized by Statute, appointed Dr. Vega as interim Medical Examiner for District 22. This took effect on October 6, 2022. State Attorney Fox noted that this action was separate from the work of the search committee.

State Attorney Fox passed out the minutes from the July 22, 2022 meeting for the committee to review. They were also provided to the committee via email prior to the meeting for review.

Following the review of the minutes, the Honorable Ken Roberson made a motion to approve the minutes. Commissioner Constance seconded the motion. The minutes received unanimous approval by the committee. (The minutes are linked on the website above this document.)

State Attorney Fox provided committee members a letter from Dr. Vega and summarized the content. (The letter will be linked on the website below this document.)

The Honorable Ken Roberson noted that if Dr. Vega was chosen for the position that the committee should keep in mind that a back-up Medical Examiner would still need to be hired.

State Attorney Fox detailed her vetting of Dr. Vega and said all references gave extremely positive reviews. She spoke to the 12th Circuit State Attorney, the Collier County Medical Examiner, Dr. Bruce Goldberger, 12th Circuit Chief Judge Charles Roberts, and Major Connie Shingledecker. Major Shingledecker was also on the Child Abuse Death Committee with Dr. Vega. She commended his analysis of SIDS deaths versus other manners of death for children as well as his use of mannequins in explaining deaths.

State Attorney Fox said this may be the best set of references or vetting she has done on anybody in her career. Dr. Wolf added that she knew of Dr. Vega's work with Major Shingledecker and the Child Abuse Death Committee. Public Defender Kathy Smith said she spoke to the 12th Circuit Public Defender who said Dr. Vega is great to work with.

Dr. Ravid reminded the board that Dr. Vega would not be working in Charlotte County full-time if hired for the position.

Dr. Ravid vetted Dr. Wayne Kurz. He spoke to Dr. Thogmartin who gave a glowing review. He said Dr. Kurz was one of the top medical examiners he ever worked with. He explained he did a tremendous number of autopsies efficiently per day and was excellent. Dr. Ravid was not able to connect with other references due to the hurricane.

The Honorable Ken Roberson vetted Dr. Kent Harshbarger, a medical examiner from Ohio. He spoke to three references and all gave positive reviews. One reference explained that Dr. Harshbarger worked with the military at Dover Air Force Base. Mr. Roberson recommended that Dr. Harshbarger be one of the people interviewed by the committee.

Mr. Roberson then asked State Attorney Fox if the State Attorney's Office Investigators had investigated the candidates. State Attorney's Office Chief Investigator J Purdy, who was in attendance at the meeting, said they had vetted all the candidates which included checking the calls for service at their residences.

It was noted by State Attorney Fox that Dr. Kenny Su had rescinded his application.

Public Defender Kathy Smith vetted Dr. Stacey Simons. There was difficulty getting her calls returned. She reached out to Public Defender Carey Haughwout in Palm Beach County and she mentioned that though she had only one case with Dr. Simons, she said she had a general positive attitude. Public Defender Smith noted that the work history of Dr. Simons was brief in various positions and she did not want some references contacted.

State Attorney Fox noted that Police Chief Davis was given Dr. Michael Markey to vet but could not attend today's meeting.

Commissioner Constance was asked to vet Dr. Aleksandar Milovanovic and had not had a chance to do so yet. He did review his CV and compared it to other candidates. He then spoke highly of Dr. Vega as he had just worked with him under the recent special circumstances of the hurricane. He suggested Dr. Vega be interviewed again, with the same questions the other candidates will get.

State Attorney Fox stated November 3 would be the preliminary interviews via Zoom, done in the same format as the Zoom preliminary interview with Dr. Vega. It was noted by State Attorney Fox that Dr. Markey may not be able to participate in the November 3rd Zoom interviews.

The November 3rd Zoom interview invitees will be Dr. Simons, Dr. Kurz, Dr. Markey, Dr. Harshbarger, and Dr. Milovanovic. Chief Deputy Casarella asked if applications are closed, it was confirmed they are. State Attorney Fox referenced that Charlotte County Attorney Knowlton and the county will handle travel and accommodations when in-person interviews occur.

Commissioner Constance said the committee should come up with questions for the candidates. State Attorney Fox said each person should come up with a question related to their position or community to provide to her and they will be asked during in-person interviews. Attorney Knowlton agreed and said that was a good process. She also reminded the committee that the county pays for one night of travel.

Two of the candidates requested to tour the medical examiner facility. The committee agreed the candidates should handle that on their own initiative.

State Attorney Fox asked Dr. Wolf to share some information about her decision to not participate in voting on a candidate. Dr. Wolf said she has a vacancy in her office and some of the candidates that applied to this committee have also applied for the job at her office so she will not be voting.

Dr. Ravid referenced not all candidates had licenses to practice in Florida. The time it takes to get a medical license in the state was discussed.

Attorney Knowlton brought forth the application for medical examiner and a Florida medical license is noted as a requirement for the position. Dr. Ravid said he has seen licenses get processed in 5-6 weeks. Dr. Wolf said it could take some time.

State Attorney Fox read notes from Dr. Coburn who suggested we confirm where candidates were trained and to make sure candidates actually do the autopsies where they work as in some states the Medical Examiner does not do all the autopsies. It depends on where they trained. Dr. Wolf explained that in Florida Medical Examiners do the autopsies.

State Attorney Fox confirmed with Chief Investigator Purdy that he is satisfied with the background checks on the applicants.

Commissioner Constance suggest 45 minutes for each informal Zoom interview. The committee agreed. State Attorney Fox said that after the Zoom interviews they can pick the questions and the next step would be the live interviews. She referenced only three committee members are required to do live interviews.

The zoom interviews were set for November 3, 2022, at 9 a.m. The live interviews were set for December 5, 2022, from 1- 6 p.m. State Attorney Fox will type up the questions gathered for the December 5th interviews. Candidates will also be notified of the December date for planning purposes for travel.

Motion to end the meeting by Commissioner Constance, seconded by Dr. Ravid. The meeting was adjourned at 5:36 p.m.