

Senate Human Services Committee
Rep. Matt Ruby, chair
Testimony of Conner Swanson - Office of the Governor
March 5, 2025

Good morning, Chair Ruby and members of the committee. For the record, my name is Conner Swanson. I serve as Senior Advisor to Governor Kelly Armstrong. Our office is here to testify in support of Senate Bill 2255.

Under current law passed during the 2021 legislative session, the State Health Officer is required to be a physician with substantive private or public administrative experience and public health experience. The State Health Officer is entitled to a salary commensurate with that individual's training and experience, and serves for a term of four years, regardless of who occupies the governorship.

When the health department and the human services department were merged in the fall of 2022, the State Health Officer position was left with no direct reports and a diminished list of duties. These duties are limited to providing strategy and policy advice to improve health and wellness, advising local public health and local health officers, and issuing disease control orders limited to the geographical area affected by a communicable disease.

In practice, the position's eligibility requirements have resulted in a narrow pool of candidates for the State Health Officer role, limited to physicians who are willing to forgo practicing medicine due to language in statute preventing the holder of the position from having a conflicting position. The salary requirement and removal of direct reports have also resulted in the State Health Officer being one of the highest paid members of the governor's cabinet, with a short list of responsibilities.

SB 2255 streamlines and simplifies the qualifications required for the State Health Officer. Under these changes, the State Health Officer will continue to be appointed by the governor. The governor will be required to appoint a person with education, training, or experience in public health and with relevant leadership experience.

The governor shall set the salary of the State Health Officer within the limits of legislative appropriations to the department, and the State Health Officer will serve at the pleasure of the governor. The legislation allows the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Human Services to appoint an advisory committee to advise the State Health Officer on matters of public health as needed, increasing the level of experience available to the State Health Officer if he or she needs assistance in making informed decisions.

In summary, SB 2255 provides needed flexibility to the appointment of a State Health Officer. The removal of the physician requirement, conflict language, and a set 4-year term will give the governor the ability to appoint a State Health Officer who has the

qualifications needed for any public health challenge our state encounters. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in support of SB 2255.