

Other views

State employees shouldn't be whipping boy for politicians

It's become all too common for state workers to be denigrated in the political process.

By Brad Wyche

I have been deeply honored to serve on the South Carolina Board of Health and Environmental Control for the last four years. Gov. Mark Sanford could not have appointed a finer and more capable person than Elizabeth Hagood to succeed me as chair. I wish her the best, and I know the board and the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) will be in good hands under her leadership.

The board has significant responsibilities, but its members are citizen volunteers who meet only once a month. The truth is that DHEC could not function without its staff; the public servants out there every day working to protect public health and the environment. They provide a wide range of important services to our state, including operating the health departments in all 46 counties, issuing and enforcing

environmental permits and inspecting health-care facilities, to name just a few.

As I leave the board, I want to say a few words about the staff. I think my comments are relevant to the staff not only of DHEC but of every state agency in South Carolina.

I am deeply troubled by the attitude of so many of our elected leaders about the employees of state government. Agencies and their staffs have become a favorite whipping boy for political campaigns and agendas. "Government is too big!" "We need to quit growing state government!" "There is too much fat in government!" These are familiar refrains in the denigrating, five-second-sound-bite world in which we now live.

Of course, it plays well back home for the folks who are struggling to make ends meet. They are led to believe their hard times are the result of those

GUEST COLUMN

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greedy, overpaid bureaucrats in Columbia. They cheer loudly when they hear the sound bites and when the speech is over, they pat their candidate or elected official on the back and say, "Go get 'em!"

When I hear this kind of rhetoric, I think about the two DHEC

employees at the state lab who worked 16-hour shifts in full respiratory gear testing suspected anthrax samples. I think about the nurse who saved the life of a 3-year-old child in Williamsburg. I think about the Home Health staff caring for homebound patients on nights and weekends. I think about the courage of the staff to order the shutdown of facilities whose operations endangered the environment. I wonder how they feel when they get home after a long day and hear the political rantings about "wasteful government bureaucrats."

This rhetoric has a pernicious effect. It steadily eats away at public respect for state government employees, then becomes the justification for not giving agencies the funding they need to do their jobs. (This was true even before the state's budget crisis, which has made a bad situation much worse).

For example, DHEC has the same number of restaurant inspectors today that it had in 1993. Yet the number of restau-

rants in South Carolina has increased from 13,700 that year to 16,024 today. Federal food safety guidelines state that a restaurant should be inspected a minimum of four times a year. The best the DHEC staff can do is an average of two inspections per year. When a food-borne illness strikes, guess who will be blamed?

The average salary for a DHEC nurse is about \$36,000, which is approximately 25 percent less than what can be earned in the private sector. Is it any wonder that the agency has a hard time finding nurses and that the annual turnover rate for those they do find is 21 percent? Gov. Sanford often talks about how government should be run like a business. How would you like to run a business with a turnover rate that high?

The average salary for DHEC engineers is also substantially less than what the same person could earn in the private sector. The annual turnover rate has been as high as 17 percent in recent years. During my tenure, I

heard repeated complaints from industry about this problem. The engineer assigned to a company's permit application, cleanup program, etc., would leave after only a short period of time, and a new person would have to be brought up to speed.

We had one industry even offer to supplement the employee's salary to keep him from leaving! Every time I heard that complaint, I told them to call their representative in the General Assembly. I hope they did.

During my confirmation hearing four years ago, I was asked if I was a "tree hugger." I readily admitted my love of trees. In fact, I believe that state government and trees have much in common. Both provide invaluable services to the public, but neither can survive without nourishment and attention.

We can't have it both ways in South Carolina. If we want DHEC and our other state agencies to provide services, they need to be respected, supported and funded — and every now and then, thanked.