



Appointing a Local Health Officer
A Guide for Counties
Published by the Health Officers Association of California (HOAC)

What the State Requires

Each county is mandated to “take measures as may be necessary to preserve and protect the public health,”¹ and the health officer is a key part of this duty. California law requires each county to appoint a health officer,² who must be a physician.³

The health officer can be appointed to direct the local health department, but this is not necessary.⁴ However, if they do not direct the department, the Board of Supervisors is required to ensure that the health officer has sufficient authority and resources, and that the organizational structure does not impede the health officer from carrying out their duties.⁵

After appointing a health officer, the county must inform CDPH of the appointment.⁶

About the Health Officer

The health officer role is unique and challenging. California law gives local health officers at least 171 distinct duties, and grants them broad authority to take action to prevent disease. The health officer is vested with authority to issue orders, including orders for isolation and quarantine.⁷ The health officer may declare a local health emergency when necessary, which can then be extended by the Board of Supervisors.⁸

The health officer can be an important spokesperson. As a physician, the health officer will be a trusted voice during outbreaks or emergencies. Both the media and the public seek experts in times of crisis.

The health officer is also the local registrar of births and deaths,⁹ the medical director of the local jails for the purposes of HIV testing,¹⁰ and the health officer for all the cities in the county, unless a city has appointed its own health officer.¹¹

Because of the broad role of the health officer, it is helpful to have a background in preventive medicine or a Master’s in Public Health.

Resources for the New Health Officer

All new health officers become members of the California Conference of Local Health Officers (CCLHO), which is an advisory body to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH). CCLHO meets once a month to receive updates from CDPH, and to hear presentations on topics of interest to the health officers. Dues-paying members can join the Health Officers Association of California (HOAC), a non-profit membership organization that also meets once a month and provides a private venue for discussion. CCLHO and HOAC together organize twice-yearly Continuing Medical Education sessions with a focus on public health and the role of the health officer.

CCLHO maintains a resource page for health officers at <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCLHO/Pages/HealthOfficerResources.aspx>. One particularly useful resource is the Health Officer Practice Guide for Communicable Disease in California.

Resources for You

A sample job description is attached, and HOAC is always available to answer any questions you may have. You can contact us at 916-441-7405 or through our website at www.calhealthofficers.org.

¹ California Health & Safety Code (HSC) [101025](#)

² HSC [101000](#)

³ HSC [101005](#) and [17 CCR 1300](#)

⁴ California Government Code (GOV) [33201](#)

⁵ GOV [33202](#)

⁶ HSC [101010](#)

⁷ HSC [101029](#)

⁸ HSC [101080](#)

⁹ HSC [102275](#)

¹⁰ California Penal Code (PEN) [7516](#)

¹¹ HSC [101375](#) and HSC [101460](#)