

From the Los Angeles Times

Chair of state's mental health panel to resign

Darrell Steinberg will step down from the Mental Health Oversight and Accountability Commission on Sept. 28. 'You have to give up your baby at some point,' the state senator says.

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September 19, 2007

State Sen. Darrell Steinberg, an architect of Proposition 63, California's landmark effort to overhaul its troubled mental health system, said Tuesday that he would resign as chairman of the state commission that oversees the reform effort.

Steinberg (D-Sacramento) will step down from the 16-member Mental Health Oversight and Accountability Commission on Sept. 28 after the board's regular, bimonthly meeting in Sacramento, he said in an interview and in a letter to colleagues.

"Mental health is going to continue to be one of my absolute, top-tier priorities because there is so much more to do," he said.

"But this particular role -- it's time. You have to give up your baby at some point," Steinberg said.

In 2004, as he was being forced out of the Assembly by term limits, Steinberg helped write and win voter approval of Proposition 63. The act placed a 1% surtax on incomes above \$1 million and dedicated the money -- more than \$2 billion so far -- to treatment of the mentally ill.

Steinberg, who has chaired the commission since its July 2005 inception, was elected to the state Senate last fall.

"I don't feel like I can give this the same intensive, all-consuming attention that I've given it in the past," he said, alluding to his legislative duties.

The commission helps oversee implementation of the act -- helping supervise how the money is spent, for example, and ensuring that it is spent in accordance with modern, reform-minded strategies of mental healthcare.

"In small and great ways, you will continue to improve the lives of those living with mental illness," Steinberg wrote in his letter to the other commissioners.

He said his decision had nothing to do with the often lumbering pace of systemwide reform or criticism that Proposition 63 had papered over a financial crisis elsewhere in the mental health system.

"I don't think there's frustration on his part," said Richard Van Horn, president of the National Mental Health Assn. of Greater Los Angeles.

"He put a huge amount of time into this, and he does have to play senator now," Van Horn said.

The remaining commissioners, most of them appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, will choose a new chair in the coming weeks or months.

Commissioner Kelvin Lee, a Republican who retired two years ago after 29 years as superintendent of the Dry

Creek Joint Elementary School District, said there was no indication who the new chair might be.

Lee said Steinberg had been an important voice in shaping the broad goals of Proposition 63 -- for instance, emphasizing early intervention before a troubled youth suffers a psychotic break.

"Sen. Steinberg has given his heart and soul to this entire process," Lee said.

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