

News

August 9, 2023

Dr. Kismet Baldwin-Santana Takes Over as San Mateo County Health Officer

Redwood City – In her first interview as San Mateo County’s Health Officer, Dr. Kismet Baldwin-Santana said her vision includes addressing the [opioid epidemic](#), improving disaster preparedness and expanding health equity.

Baldwin-Santana this week began her tenure as health officer, a role that gained widespread public attention during the COVID-19 pandemic. She succeeds Dr. Scott Morrow, who retired after 31 years of service, and is the first woman to hold the post in the County’s history.

“The role of health officer is uniquely challenging,” said Dave Pine, president of the Board of Supervisors. “While the pandemic thrust health officers into the spotlight, the day-to-day work involves improving the overall health of our entire community.”

“Dr. Baldwin-Santana is uniquely positioned to guide us as we continue to shape a public health system that will help San Mateo County residents live longer and better lives,” Pine said.

Appointed by the [Board of Supervisors](#), the pick vaults Baldwin-Santana into a role with broad authority under California law to prevent disease and the authority to issue health orders. The health officer serves as a principal spokesperson and a trusted voice during outbreaks or emergencies.

Yet the majority of the day-to-day work entails developing public health policy, working with community-based organizations and advising elected officials on public health strategies.

Most recently the interim health officer in Sonoma County, Dr. Baldwin-Santana has been a deputy health officer in Sonoma County, a health officer in San Joaquin County, and a quarantine medical officer for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Baldwin-Santana has been deeply involved in public health work since earning her bachelor’s degree in microbiology and a Doctor of Medicine degree at Ohio State University. She did post-doctoral work at UCLA where she studied ways to reduce the incidence of [sickle cell disease](#).

Early in her career as a neonatologist in New Hampshire, Baldwin-Santana developed treatment plans and managed care for newborns experiencing [neonatal abstinence syndrome](#) due to exposure to opioids in the womb.

Babies often suffered from tremors, poor feeding reflexes, and irritability. In some cases, she found that mothers who had developed an addiction to painkillers often escalated to heroin and other street drugs during their pregnancies.

She teamed up with obstetricians and gynecologists working in methadone clinics to help get mothers into treatment programs. Such first-hand experiences helped to shape her career.

“I really enjoyed that work,” she said. “It allowed me to see the upstream aspect of medicine, addressing the causes of the problems facing my patients.”

Such work led her to the broader field of public health. She has worked with coalitions involving law enforcement, schools, substance use disorder treatment providers, general health care providers, emergency medical services and other key players to tackle opioid overdoses and deaths.

Her interest in community health led her to San Joaquin County, where she served as health officer from 2018-19. She focused on programs for communicable disease, sexually transmitted infection and tuberculosis. This included a mobile team of community health workers, disease investigators and nurses to perform rapid testing and vaccine administration.

As COVID-19 pandemic began, she served as a quarantine medical officer for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at San Francisco International Airport. She supervised entry-screening procedures and assessed travelers’ disease exposure, working with local health care providers and agencies, including San Mateo County Health, to prevent further spread.

As Sonoma County’s deputy health officer, she oversaw COVID-19 testing, vaccine administration, case investigation and contact tracing and participated in the region’s coordination and response through the Association of Bay Area Health Officials.

During the pandemic, she also made time to complete a master’s degree in public health at the University of California, Berkeley.

“I really liked the ethics class and the course on implementation science,” she said. “How do you get people to take a vaccine? The COVID-19 vaccines were well tested and very effective, but they were a tough sell for many communities.”

As she steps into the role as the County’s top public health official, Baldwin-Santana praises Morrow’s decades of service and the support for public health from elected leaders and the community. “There’s a really strong foundation here,” she said. “I’m excited to take a broad look. What are the best initiatives and policies and how can we all collaborate to move things forward?”

Louise Rogers, chief of San Mateo County Health, said, “I’m excited to welcome Dr. Baldwin-Santana to our county, where we share her passion for working to address the underlying causes of poor health in the community. She brings a wealth of experience that we can all learn from.”

In her spare time, Baldwin-Santana enjoys salsa dancing, hiking and cycling with her husband. Together, they have a cat named Diego.