

April 1, 2021

Dear CalHR,

Just over a year ago on Friday, March 6, 2020, a senior advisor at the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) sent an email to a group of research scientists with the subject line: “Epi support for the weekend surge.”

Shortly after I received this email I reported to CDPH’s Richmond Campus Coordination Center (RCCC), a large conference room with rows of computers intended for emergency response. My assignment was to manage the Grand Princess Cruise Ship’s manifest of passenger and crew information and link it with SARS-CoV-2 laboratory test data as more than 1,000 individuals disembarked the ship in Oakland, were tested, and went into quarantine. The goal was to identify and track COVID-19 cases as they moved from the ship to a hospital or quarantine location, and ultimately, to prevent the spread of the virus into our local communities.

The initial laboratory testing for the Grand Princess was performed by professional scientists in CDPH’s Viral and Rickettsial Disease Laboratory. This included tests for 21 individuals with positive SARS-CoV-2 results whose samples were airlifted by helicopter to our Richmond Campus.<sup>1</sup> Dozens of state scientists and public health professionals worked around the clock in March 2020. By the end of the month, it was not safe to work in-person and most left the RCCC to work from home.

The pace of the COVID-19 response never slowed. I served in multiple roles, including: as a statistical programmer; Data Team Manager overseeing the production of daily reports and COVID-19 case data that were (and still are) released publicly online every day;<sup>2</sup> and currently, as a subject matter expert to the team that leads California’s daily epidemiologic and surveillance response for COVID-19. Partially due to my work on the pandemic, I was promoted to research scientist III with CDPH’s Immunization Branch in August 2020.

Rotations on the Data Team were especially grueling—most days were 12-16 hours. We often received additional, urgent and complicated assignments for media requests from major news agencies such as CNN and ABC. We performed time-sensitive analyses to answer questions for Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Mark Ghaly. I analyzed data and wrote a summary for former State Epidemiologist Dr. Gil Chavez before he briefed the California Legislature. We performed analyses directly for the Governor’s Office and worked past midnight to update data in Governor Newsom’s slides that he was presenting at a Monday morning press briefing.

I recount these details to give you a snapshot of what my job has entailed over the past year and to highlight the expertise required of CDPH scientists. However, there is so much more to what my colleagues have accomplished during the pandemic, including all the other essential public health functions we have continued to juggle. Our work on COVID-19 not only continues today,

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/us/california-coronavirus-cruise-ship.html>

<sup>2</sup> COVID19.CA.GOV: <https://covid19.ca.gov/state-dashboard/>

but has expanded to producing metrics that determine when counties can reopen safely, maintaining our disease reporting systems such as CalREDIE, vaccine distribution informatics, and laboratory testing of SARS-CoV-2 variants. CDPH scientists lead this work at every level.

We are required to track our hours while working on the COVID-19 response. In 2020, I spent at least 1,232 hours working on COVID-19 response activities. This included 357 hours or nine work weeks of additional, unpaid labor on nights and weekends. When I submitted for arduous pay early in the response, my claim was rejected because of a technicality on how a work week was defined. I thought this was trivial, but given how many more hours my colleagues contributed, I thought it would be equally as trivial if I contested the rejection. Further, CDPH scientists have worked the majority of our hours on the COVID-19 response with the current 9.23% pay reduction.

I started at CDPH in 2014 after finishing a master's degree in public health (MPH) at the University of California, Berkeley. I was first hired as a fellow in CDPH's California Epidemiologic Investigation Service (Cal-EIS), a competitive program for recent graduates with at least a master's degree.<sup>3</sup> The annual salary of a Cal-EIS fellow is \$45,000 and does not include any benefits—only a monthly stipend which was rarely mailed on time and required that I calculate and pay my own state and federal payroll taxes. The only way my wife and I were able to afford living in the Bay Area in 2014, with me working as a Cal-EIS fellow and she as a teacher, was through an income-based, below-market-rate housing program in Berkeley. We found a small, third-floor apartment that we still rent and qualify for today—seven years later—and now with our one-year-old son.

I always assumed that as our careers advanced we would be able to grow into a larger apartment or perhaps buy a home. Even with my promotions from Cal-EIS to grant-funded epidemiologist, to research scientist II and then research scientist III, our current apartment is still our best and only option in the Bay Area. We now understand that unless we either leave the public sector or leave the Bay Area, we will be stuck in this apartment for years to come.

Working in public service has been a privilege both during the COVID-19 pandemic and also prior to it. However, the last 12 months have illuminated the privilege you must have in order to work in California's civil service. I am not sure how one can afford the cost of living, healthcare, housing, saving for retirement, and saving for your children's education on the salary of a professional scientist without having one or more advantages in your background.

CalHR can take immediate steps to improve the lives of professional state scientists. CalHR can eliminate inequities in state service such that professional engineers do not have distinct and unearned advantages over equally skilled, equally educated, and equally valuable classes of professionals such as my scientist colleagues who work countless hours to ensure the health and safety of millions of Californians. Professional scientists need to be paid equivalent salaries to professional engineers—today. Slowly closing the salary gap over time while CalHR and PEGC just

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<sup>3</sup> Cal-EIS:

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/DCDIC/CDCB/Pages/CaliforniaEpidemiologicInvestigationServiceFellowshipProgram.aspx?>

agreed to a 3% general salary increase for all engineer classifications is not acceptable.<sup>4</sup> Professional scientists also need to be given the same geographic pay differentials as engineers for working in places like the Bay Area. We also need substantially more autonomy for telework options that allow us to live outside of California's most expensive regions. We need to be given the same healthcare reimbursements as engineers, which they champion in their MOU as the best of any bargaining unit in the state.

Reading through the PEGC 2020-2022 MOU, there are several other benefits including longevity and retention pay differentials that are provided to professional engineers and not professional scientists. Why is it that the families of engineers somehow deserve additional benefits, lower healthcare costs, extra money for housing and higher salaries for equal work? Perhaps it is related to PEGC's lengthy, litigious history with the State of California. Or more concerningly, perhaps their advantages are related to age-old, workplace disparities: with few exceptions, men, and especially white men, comprise 80% or more of the engineering workforce according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>5</sup> Scientists in my discipline, like the ones at CDPH performing complex statistical analyses or whole genome sequencing of coronavirus variants, are nearly 80% women.<sup>6</sup> Professional scientists have bachelor, master and doctorate degrees, can command higher salaries in consulting firms, the tech industry, research and biotech fields, but we choose service.

It is time for CalHR to recognize and act on the opportunity it has to end systematic inequalities that undermine marginalized groups, including women and people of color, in our civil service or prevent them from considering a career in the public sector altogether. It is time for CalHR to close longstanding gaps in benefits and wages immediately, and to make public service viable to more professionals who will not only increase the diversity and skillset of our workforce, but will also more fully represent the California communities that we serve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kyle Rizzo', with a stylized, cursive script.

Kyle Rizzo, MPH

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<sup>4</sup> PEGC 2020-2022 MOU: <http://pecg.org/wp-content/uploads/Unit-9-MOU-2020-2022.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm>

<sup>6</sup> de Beaumont and ASTHO Public Health Workforce Survey, 2017: <https://debeaumont.org/signup-phwins/explore-the-data/>