

March 3, 2015

This is Erin Dunn of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce with a Community Comment.

Humboldt—we're in a crisis. A crisis of attracting and retaining medical staff. It's been evident for a while that our hospitals are in dire need of successful recruitment, but the news on Friday of a staffing crisis at the County's Mental Health agency confirms what we already know—having beautiful scenery is not enough to bring in and keep qualified medical staff.

We blame it on a number of things. One, there is not enough shopping. Two, travel is difficult. Three, they just aren't hip to the marijuana culture.

In my opinion, it's not the shopping. If everything else was good here, shopping wouldn't be an issue.

Maybe it's the inconvenient travel. But when you are working and happy, you learn to adjust.

We're getting closer when we talk about the marijuana culture—and I'm not talking about the smoking of the medicine, I'm talking about the culture that surrounds it (for instance, about the lack of available workers during trimming season)—I think that is definitely part of the problem. There is a certain lack of professionalism due to limited workforce in a lot of our service industries and, unfortunately, for better or worse, that's the first thing visitors experience when they come to Humboldt.

I have another theory as well. We don't value professionals with salaries that fit their skill level. How many times have I heard some people say that living among the grandeur of the redwoods and rivers is payment enough. Balderdash!

If we want to compete with other areas for medical personnel, then we need to offer competitive wages and benefits. To be successful we can no longer say that because the rest of Humboldt County is below competitive salaries that we can expect medical professionals to accept the same. We see their salaries printed in the paper and it seems shocking—but only to us. Those are the wages that doctors earn anywhere else.

Another component of attracting and retaining medical professionals is making their spouses and partners feel welcomed and included. AEDC is starting a program this month designed to help retain professionals that move to our area. They are targeting people who haven't quite yet found their place in Humboldt. The group is called "Humboldt Connections." The purpose of the program is to get these folks, often partners and spouses of professionals who have moved to the area, networking with each other and with established Humboldtians. They may go on field trips, hear speakers, and find some of the great things in our area they might not have discovered on their own. I'm sure we'll be hearing more about this program in the months to come.

We can use our extraordinary surroundings as a bonus when we recruit medical personnel—and any professionals for that matter—to our area. But hasn't the time come to realize that forests and rivers are not enough compensation for below market wages? This isn't the only beautiful area of our country, and we are not the only ones competing for medical personnel.

This has been Erin Dunn with a Community Comment.