

Governor shakes up nursing panel, adds 2 from San Diego County

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SAN DIEGO ” The governor has named two county residents to the California Board of Registered Nursing as part of a major shakeup in the wake of reports that it takes an inordinately long time – an average of 3-½ years – to discipline problem nurses.

Catherine Todero, 57, director of the school of nursing at San Diego State University, and Richard Rice, 60, a retired state official from Imperial Beach, were among six people appointed to the nine-member board responsible for overseeing 350,000 licensed nurses.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced the appointments late Monday after firing three sitting board members and saying he would fill three vacancies.

He didn't remove the seventh board member – Nancy Beecham, director of nursing for the Edgemoor Geriatric Hospital in Santee and president of Retro Medical Billing – because her term hasn't ended. The other two board members are appointed by the Legislature.

Ruth Ann Terry, the board's longtime executive director, resigned Tuesday as the fallout continued from a series of scathing stories published by *The Los Angeles Times* and the nonprofit news organization ProPublica.

The articles found, among other things, that dozens of nurses continued to work for years after being fired or disciplined by hospitals or other agencies for major infractions such as violence, criminal convictions and drug theft or abuse.

“It is absolutely unacceptable that it takes years to investigate such outrageous allegations of misconduct,” Schwarzenegger said in a statement.

But it will take more than management shuffling on the board to fix problems that have persisted for years, said Robert Fellmeth of the Center for Public Interest Law at the University of San Diego.

Budget cuts depleted the agency's staff in recent years, and cases against rogue nurses are handled by the same people who investigate complaints against landscapers, barbers and other non-medical professionals, he said.

“The governor is on the wrong foot if he thinks doing this kind of symbolic the-buck-stops-here is going to stop anything,” Fellmeth said.

Other critics of the nursing board said that for years, it failed to require fingerprinting of about 40 percent of nurses in the state. Until late last year, nurses also didn't have to disclose criminal activity when renewing their licenses. And California didn't cross-check its nursing files with records from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Internal Revenue Service and other states' nursing boards.

Lawmakers need to do with the nursing board what they did a decade ago with the state board that regulates physicians, Fellmeth said. At the time, the Legislature carved out a group of investigators within the state Attorney General's Office who are devoted to scrutinizing doctors.

Legislators also should increase license fees for nurses, which are substantially lower than those for doctors and lawyers, in order to raise the money needed to boost the board's staffing, Fellmeth said.

Efforts to reach the nursing board Tuesday were unsuccessful. The board's phone system had been overwhelmed by midafternoon, according to an automated message, and could no longer handle more incoming calls.

Todero became director of the SDSU nursing school in 2006 after serving as associate dean of the college of nursing at the University of Nebraska. She previously was an intensive-care nurse and served as a captain in the U.S. Army Reserve Nurse Corps.

Directors of other nursing programs in San Diego County said Todero will serve the governor well.

“She is quite talented and a politically savvy individual,” said Judy Papenhausen with California State University San Marcos.

Todero's calm personality should benefit the board during this tumultuous time, said Debbie Yaddow, Grossmont College's associate dean of nursing.

Rice was undersecretary of the Labor and Workforce Development Agency in Sacramento from 2005 to 2006 after holding other positions in that agency and the Department of Industrial Relations.

Neither Rice nor Todero was available for comment Tuesday.