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Kansas Health Foundation names its new president

BY ROY WENZL
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Steve Coen already knows what good the Kansas Health Foundation has done so far; he was there the past 21 years as it gave out millions and tried to improve public health across the state.

What he hopes to learn now is where the foundation falls short, what more it can do, how it can redefine itself a bit and what it needs to do with a new leader.

That new leader, beginning Sept. 15, is Coen, foundation officials said Thursday.

They named him president and chief executive, replacing Marni Vliet.

"I have worked with Steve for over 20 years," Vliet said. "I know him to have a longtime commitment to this state and the people of Kansas, especially in terms of the foundation's mission, to improve the health of all Kansans."

What Kansans will get out of Coen is not to be underestimated, said Rod Bremby, secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment.

He's worked with Coen on public health issues for years, and admires him unabashedly.

"He doesn't talk much sometimes, but that's because he's listening to you," Bremby said Thursday. "His appointment is fantastic news for Kansas, because the Health Foundation is a great partner with us, and Steve is remarkably thoughtful, methodical, aggressive in helping people, and very collaborative.

"Not a lot of people know the true extent of what the Health Foundation does for Kansas," Bremby said. "But I can tell you they do a great deal of good, much of it under the radar in public policy, many things fundamental to the better health of all Kansans.... And they've got the right guy at the top now."

Coen, 55, is a native of St. John. He earned a bachelor's degree from Emporia State University and a law degree from Washburn University Law School. He and his wife, Monica, have two teenage children.

He has worked for the foundation since 1987, serving as vice president for administration the past 10 years. Before that he'd worked for former Kansas Sen. Bob Dole in a variety of roles, including state director and legislative assistant. Dole was a reference for him for this job, Coen said.

Coen said he's proud of the foundation's work. It began in 1985, founded with \$200 million from the proceeds of the sale of Wesley Hospital. And though it has handed out \$390 million in good works around the state, it still has \$540 million in assets.

"I've been daydreaming for years about what I would do if I ever have a chance to run it," he said.

But his first major move, he said, will be to ask residents, community leaders and university people across the state what the foundation needs to do to improve itself.

He plans to travel the state to ask what the foundation should do to clarify its mission, which for years has been to work to improve the health of all Kansans.

At the top of his agenda, he said, is a survey of community leaders, recently completed, about the foundation's effectiveness.

He did not want to go into detail about it on his first day, but said that "we learned a lot from that survey, and it will prompt us to work to clarify some of our goals and strategies so that people better understand what we're trying to do."

The list of foundation accomplishments is long, he said. It allocates about \$26 million annually in Kansas in the areas of public health, policy, leadership and children's health. It has created 12 community foundations -- which he said have enhanced and inspired their communities in a variety of ways -- and plans to expand that program.

"We're very well known nationally for our work in public health in the state, and we're very well known in policy development through the Kansas Health Institute," he said.

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