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Obama veteran, CFO of College Board picked to head state health department

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Robert Gordon comes to Michigan after four years as CFO of The College Board

Pistons executive helped recruit Gordon to Whitmer administration



The College Board

Robert Gordon, senior vice president of finance and global strategy at The College Board, is joining Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's administration as director of the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is turning to a veteran of the Obama administration who helped guide federal budget planning to run the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, a massive government agency that has been operating in a state of turmoil for the past three years.

Robert Gordon, senior vice president of finance and global strategy at The College Board, is joining the Whitmer administration on Monday as the new director of DHHS. He was previously a high-level official in two federal agencies in President Barack Obama's administration.

Whitmer is tasking Gordon with running a 14,000-employee state department with a \$25 billion budget that she has described as "enormous" and had [mulled splitting up](#).

"He brings a unique set of skills and experiences that will lead the Department of Health and Human Services to drive real results that help hardworking families," Whitmer said in a statement.

DHHS oversees social welfare programs that directly touch one-quarter of the state's 10 million residents, works closely with managed care companies that administer Medicaid health insurance programs and has broad responsibilities over protecting public health.

It's the area of public health where DHHS has been under intense scrutiny for the past three years, for the state agency's role in the Flint water crisis.

The department's former director, Nick Lyon, and former chief medical executive, Eden Wells, are fighting involuntary manslaughter charges in Genesee County Circuit Court that stem from a deadly outbreak of Legionnaires' disease tied to [Flint's disastrous 2014 switch from Detroit's water system](#). Wells remains employed at DHHS after securing a [newly-created civil service position](#) as an advisory physician.

In an interview with *Crain's*, Gordon called the government failures surrounding the Flint water crisis "an extraordinary injustice."

"I will need to take time to learn more about precisely what happened and what needs to happen moving forward," Gordon said.

Gordon, 47, said he would run the department with four guiding principles: Act on scientific data; put the interest of the public "ahead of my personal interests or the interests of the agency"; treat residents of all racial or socioeconomic backgrounds "with dignity, honesty and respect"; and spend taxpayer dollars "like they were my own."

At the heart of the criminal prosecutions against Lyon, Wells and other state employees in DHHS and the Department of Environmental Quality has been scrutiny of how both departments initially dismissed the outside scientific research of lead levels in Flint's water and in the bloodstreams of the city's children.

The criminal cases against Lyon and Wells hinge on their alleged failure to alert the public about a bacterial outbreak that went on for two consecutive summers.

Gordon joins Whitmer's team after four years as chief financial officer at The College Board, a \$1 billion-a-year not-for-profit organization that administers the SAT college-entrance exam to 10 million test-takers annually.

"I have significant experience managing large, complex organizations that are in the business of delivering services effectively," Gordon told *Crain's*.

Prior to that, he did a stint as an acting assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education and worked in President Barack Obama's Office of Management and Budget for more than four years.

At OMB, Gordon worked with Awenate Cobbina, now the vice president of business affairs and associate counsel for the Detroit Pistons and Palace Sports & Entertainment.

Cobbina served as deputy director of Whitmer's transition team and helped recruit Gordon to join the administration.

In the Obama administration, there were "show horses and workhorses," Cobbina said.

"Robert was firmly in the workhorse category," Cobbina told *Crain's*. "He developed a vast knowledge of the federal budget in a wide variety of areas."

Gordon gained a reputation for implementing evidence-based programs in the federal government and demanding results, Cobbina said.

"There's not that many people who have that level of familiarity with more than one or two federal programs," Cobbina said.

As the new DHHS director, Gordon also inherits a Medicaid work-requirement rule left in place by former Republican Gov. Rick Snyder and the GOP-controlled Legislature that is supposed to take effect in 2020.

Like Whitmer, Gordon also personally opposes the new requirement that Medicaid recipients show they're working at least 80 hours per month or getting trained for a job in order to remain enrolled in the Healthy Michigan program that provides taxpayer-funded health insurance for nearly 700,000 residents.

"I don't think taking away health insurance from people that are struggling is productive," said Gordon, who worked at the liberal think tank the Center for American Progress earlier in his career. "I think it can cause them grave damage in their lives and when they land in the emergency room because they don't have insurance, it costs everybody."

Last month, the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services approved Michigan's application for a waiver to impose the work requirements.

"There's a law, there's an approved waiver, and I will look hard with the governor and with the team at the appropriate next steps, given the law that's now on the books," Gordon said.

Gordon and his family now live in Washington, D.C. According to Whitmer's office, Gordon's annual salary as DHHS director will be \$175,000, the same amount Lyon was paid.

Joshua Sharfstein, a former Maryland state health commissioner, also worked with Gordon in the Obama administration and said Gordon was "focused like a laser beam" on evidence-based outcomes in public health programs.

"I think it's extremely important that the new leader be someone of the highest integrity who really cares about putting science first and really using science to help improve health in the state of Michigan," said Sharfstein, a vice dean at Johns Hopkins University's Bloomberg School of Public Health. "I really think the governor made an inspired choice."

Inline Play

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