

**RES23-239
Testimony**

MISC. COMM. 519

COUNCIL

COUNCIL Meeting

Meeting Date: Oct 4, 2023 @ 10:00 AM

Support: 1

Oppose: 0

I wish to comment: 0

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Representing: Self	Position: Support	Submitted: Sep 29, 2023 @ 10:37 AM

**DYLAN P. ARMSTRONG, INDIVIDUAL
TESTIMONY: BILL RES 23-239 (2023)**

29 September, 2023

*Honolulu City Council
c/o the Honorable Tommy Waters, Chair
and the Honorable Esther Kia'āina, Vice Chair
City & County of Honolulu
Honolulu Hale*

Subject: Resolution 23-239, Relating to Qualifications for the Director of Emergency Management

Aloha mai kākou, Chair Waters, Vice Chair Kia'āina, and esteemed Council Members:

I appreciate the interest shown by the Honorable Matt Weyer in introducing his timely measure, which affects the eligibility criteria for the Director, Department of Emergency Management (DDEM). However, I comment individually, for several reasons that need not be elaborated.

ON THE STATED QUALIFICATIONS PROPOSED:

For the measure language, I have comments. The measure would require that the DDEM hold a:

“A bachelor’s degree in emergency management, public health, public administration, or a relevant field. Advanced degrees or certifications in related fields are preferred.”

The purpose underlying this requirement would be to restrict eligibility to those with a relevant academic background in emergency management (EM).

I have worked directly in EM for several years. I worked as a ‘civilian firefighter’ within the disaster response scheme (the federal Incident Command System) on a public lands wildfire back in 2014. I’ve known EM peers at the federal, state, local, and private (consulting) levels. Fewer individuals than I can count on one hand hold a degree in emergency management (EM).

It is a relatively new field of study. At this time, one cannot graduate with a bachelor’s degree in EM from a Hawai’i public institution. My prior field, urban planning, is at best middle-aged (1960s), a graduate degree only at the University of Hawai’i, with an option for EM but not a discrete degree. Public Administration is typically a graduate program although I believe UHM currently offers a BA program. EM studies are mostly for graduate students only and at relatively few campuses still.

Because most elected officials have no practical experience working in bureaucracies, I’m pointing out one of the biggest problems in hiring for agencies. Something true for EM and for fields as various as parks management, grants management, and urban planning. *It’s the difficulty in obtaining qualified applicants who do not fail eligibility on some ‘gotcha’ criterion.* When I worked for the Department of Health, I could not qualify for permanent civil service work despite my environmental degree and years of environmental experience (good enough for the US Forest Service and National Park Service), because the Department struck out any résumé experience obtained before graduation from the years-of-experience eligibility. This included an internship with the City, by the way. So I had to make do, working without health benefits for the Health Department (ironic,

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perhaps) as an ‘emergency hire.’ This used to happen in agencies all the time. I will elaborate on recruitment difficulties under the experience language.

My degree is in none of these cited programs in the measure. Natural Resources, which I studied at UH, is applied ecology—and I specifically studied forestry (including grasslands and wildfires), climate change, botany, geology, and worked in a genetics-based conservation laboratory. So there’s tie-in to wildfires and climate change. With respect, public health (pandemics or toxicological disasters being its tie-in) is no more relevant to EM than Natural Resources, which would not necessarily be a relevant degree to the Department of Human Resources (DHR). Geology or Geophysics, for that matter, would be similarly relevant for atmospheric (hurricane and flood) and tsunami hazards, yet there’s little-to-no guarantee that DHR would adjudicate such favorably.

“At least five years of training or experience in emergency management or public health.”

Note that by the time of the 2023 Maui wildfires, Maui's prior DDEM would have qualified for his position. Years of experience seems to be at the heart of the urgency and controversy surrounding qualifications.

Here’s a relevant example to ponder. I’ve worked under an octogenarian ex-retiree, State Hazard Mitigation Officer (SHMO), Larry Kanda, in the disaster mitigation program, a grants-based, infrastructure planning scheme. Three people in the state qualified for the SHMO position. Besides Kanda, former SHMO David Kennard of Kaua’i, now out-of-retirement and working in local EM. Third, a former Acting SHMO served in another Officer role; he’s now totally retired. I would not qualify as SHMO before 2024 given the position description, due to the years-of-experience requirement. Two other Acting SHMO’s (past and present) who are miraculously below retirement age have had to work the position in an ‘emergency hire’ capacity with no job stability for some years. The SHMO pay was exactly equal to the mitigation project manager-officer-planner roles beneath it, just with supervisor responsibility. SHMO pay was later raised somewhat. An out-of-state candidate was hired. She quit within two years, for reasons discussed in local media.¹

Government culture in Hawai’i continues to put people in their 70s and 80s in positions of leadership as a reflexive instinct rather than spending the resources to develop a pool of experienced people. Reasons as varied as 170-years of Confucian influence as well as political patronage (which can be a form of corruption) are offered. But as a whole system for providing short-term control and order? This is disastrous (forgive the pun) long-term organizational planning.

DDEM pay is significantly higher than SHMO pay, but it’s not exceptionally lucrative by cost-of-living (COL) standards. You can earn multiple six-figures per year as an EM consultant. Travel on per diem, avoid political opportunists and character assassination, and bill or bilk the same EM agencies that would give you untold stress for a fraction of the pay in return. As a result, Hawai’i EM has bled many individuals either to other organizations or separate industries in the past few years, including from within DEM, HIEMA, and Maui Emergency Management Agency (MEMA).

¹ “A Cascade Of Breakdowns In Lahaina Fire Exposes Flaws In Emergency Management System.” Honolulu Civil Beat. <https://www.civilbeat.org/2023/08/a-cascade-of-breakdowns-in-lahaina-fire-exposes-flaws-in-emergency-management-system/>

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There's only two pools you can recruit experienced candidates from: locally, or outside. Local candidates have to be willing to work years within the field for bad pay, endure "toxic" coworkers and supervisors, and deliver results within labyrinthine technical programs, programs which are not understood by merit of holding an EM degree or even other EM experience.

In effect, many government workers have to decide to put their family and home and retirement goals on hold to work for a bunch of ingrates, to "work their way up" the system. I'm not attempting cuteness or insolence, but to speak for thousands of good people who've worked for local and state government and made enormous sacrifices to do so. Many of the best have left EM.

Outside (malihini) candidates coming in as appointees have to be able to adjust to sticker shock for COL and possible culture shock in the absence of the large family and friend groups that kama'aina possess. A previous SHMO from North America lasted two years and left for good.

The last three requirements in the measure are at least at first glance much more flexible:

"At least three years of experience in leading emergency management efforts at the local, state, or federal level... [a]t least three years of the experience specified in item (b) must have been in a responsible administrative capacity, demonstrating leadership and the ability to coordinate complex operations involving numerous agencies and personnel... [d]emonstrated capability to collaborate with local, state, and federal agencies during emergency situations."

Insofar as these would allow actual recruiters and hiring managers flexibility, these are quite good.

In conclusion, I commend the council above all else in showing its curiosity and diligence, in reflecting on these thoughts and those of my fellow citizens. While my thoughts are varied and verbose, I hope these provide useful insight that penetrates the actual nature of EM and the challenges present therein.

Sincerely yours,



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