



## Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative

Alameda County | City of Berkeley | Contra Costa County | Marin County | City and County of San Francisco | San Mateo County | Santa Clara County | Solano County

June 13, 2011

### TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

This letter is to convey my strongest possible endorsement of Robert Tobin's efforts to become Executive Director of any homeless transitional housing program fortunate to consider his employment. I cannot imagine anyone more qualified, or better suited, for such a position.

I worked for the San Francisco Department of Public Health for seventeen years (1982-1999), including ten years as Director of Homeless Programs. During that period, I also served as policy lead on homelessness in the mayoral administration of Art Agnos (1988-1992), when we worked with public and private agencies, service organizations and homeless people to develop and implement Beyond Shelter: A Homeless Plan for San Francisco.

I subsequently served as Director of the Public Health Division for five years, when I was administratively responsible for public health, mental health and substance abuse programs, including our housing and homeless services. For the past eleven years, I was a co-founder and Director of the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative, a collaboration of senior officials and staff from eleven local health departments in the bay area committed to incorporating social justice into public health.

I knew Robert through a period of three San Francisco mayors—Dianne Feinstein, Art Agnos and Frank Jordan—whose policies and priorities were widely different. Robert was Executive Director of Central City Hospitality House, not only a linchpin in homeless services, but also a key link between community advocacy and public policy. Robert had a rare capacity to negotiate between the principled activism of homeless people and their advocates, and the exigencies of public policy. Since I occupied some of that same space myself, sometimes as a relative outsider but at other times the quintessential insider, I came to appreciate what a treasured resource Robert was. He was driven by a compassion for the people he served, but he also dealt artfully and strategically with their advocates and with City Hall, challenging but not alienating, largely because his sincere commitment was always his lead. I marveled at how he covered a span of mayors, from a moderate aristocrat to a liberal social worker to a conservative former police chief, and managed to gain their respect. I drew frequently from Robert's versatility to help me through the rough transitions, even though I was ostensibly on the inside.

More than knowing how to negotiate the political terrain, however, Robert also understood the relationship between services and policy. He had, to use his phrase, a “principled pragmatism” in which he understood the fundamental importance of providing services to people in greatest need, yet realized that, particularly on issues like homelessness, there were also deep social and political roots. Robert was able to successfully manage and expand a highly respected service provider organization, yet also engage in policy forums to address the larger issues that contribute to homelessness. He was unique among his peers in that regard.

Robert brings another asset to this work. In addition to having managed major service organizations, he studied the public policy-making process while earning his Masters of Public Administration, and he approaches his work with that perspective. As I understand the recent evolution of Sacramento Steps Forward, that is the kind of experience and training this position requires.

I fully realize that a letter of recommendation from someone who worked with Robert over a decade ago, and in San Francisco no less, is hardly the strongest credential from which to make a case for his qualifications for this position. However, having followed his career, albeit from afar, I trust that many people who know of his work in Sacramento can speak more directly to his impressive work with Cottage Housing and on housing and homeless policies in Sacramento. Rest assured, though, that Robert’s credibility goes back far before his pioneering work in Sacramento, and that his legacy still reverberates in San Francisco.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to convey my wholehearted support for Robert Tobin, and I thank you for considering my comments in your deliberations.

Sincerely,



Bob Prentice, PhD  
Director (Retired)  
Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative