

**A Final Thought**  
**Goodbye, Dr. Southard**  
**By Kathleen Piché, L.C.S.W., Public Affairs Director**



As Director of the largest public mental health system in the United States for a record-breaking seventeen years, Marvin J. Southard, D.S.W., or “Jimmy” as his family and friends call him (middle initial J stands for James), is leaving the building.

I have had the good fortune of hearing Dr. Southard speak repeatedly over the past seven years and have always been impressed at his ability to fit a just-right message with each crowd at every event. If you’ve seen him in action, you know what I mean.

Sometimes, it starts with a definition. Other times, specific examples are used to illustrate a point. While promoting the Housing First model, he was known to ask, “What good is providing mental health services if a person is living under a bridge?”

In many of his speeches, Dr. Southard has referenced the books and stories of author Malcolm Gladwell to illustrate a point. The story of good health and longevity in Roseto, Pennsylvania, comes to mind. In Roseto, Italian immigrants were studied for their unusually healthy community; there was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, very little crime, and nobody was on welfare. People in Roseto died of old age. It is a small town among the hills where residents stopped to speak with each other often, had many civic organizations and downplayed the division of wealth. In short, they helped each other out, especially in times of need. Dr. Southard used the story about the thriving community from “Outliers” to illuminate how we might create a socially inclusive, healthy community here in Los Angeles. His speech describing Roseto was so effective that others started using the example in their own public appearances.

Over the years, Dr. Southard has stressed social inclusion as a path to hope, wellness and recovery. Awareness about the stigma and discrimination associated with having symptoms or diagnosis of a mental health disorder is part of our mission; the first stop

on the road to finding resources and getting help. He has quoted Sir Francis Bacon, who said “Knowledge is power,” adding, “because we, at the Department of Mental Health, believe that knowledge about mental illness leads to the power of hope for wellness and recovery.”

I thought it might be appropriate to say farewell to our leader with a few Gladwell quotes I haven’t heard him use publicly. One that might describe what the general public has traditionally assumed about those with mental health disorders might be: “It would be interesting to find out what goes on in that moment when someone looks at you and comes to all sorts of conclusions.”

A Gladwell quote describing the leadership of Dr. Southard might be: “Truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking.”

One of Dr. Southard’s greatest strengths might be that he’s seen by colleagues as an individual able to connect with anyone on a human level, beyond petty politics. And so, I will leave him with one last Gladwell quote that may describe why so many LACDMH programs have been effective and flourished under the tenure of Marvin J. Southard over the years:

“The values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on who we are.”