

Right pick for 'drug czar'? That's the wrong question

Good jobs are hard to find. Yet Gov. Terry Branstad's office says no one applied to be the director of the Office of Drug Control Policy. He gave the job that pays \$90,000 a year to Steve Lukan. The 33-year-old former Republican state lawmaker has a degree in political science, helped his father run a family-owned tire center and worked as an account executive in commercial insurance.

Considering there are numerous Iowans with years of experience in drug policy, the public is likely wondering why this job was given to someone with none. The governor's office and Lukan say it wasn't because he had employed Branstad's daughter-in-law as a legislative aide. One lawmaker called the hire a case of "politics as usual."

There is truth to that. Every governor reserves the right to appoint whomever he or she wants to oversee a state agency. Still, it was tempting to pen an editorial reminding Branstad

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that those serving at his pleasure should have at least some expertise in the area of state government they'll be overseeing. It's reasonable to expect the administration to advertise openings and consider a few candidates.

But we decided not to expound on that today. Rather, there is a more important issue regarding the Office of Drug Control Policy: It should not even exist as a stand-alone state agency. The governor should not have had to hire anyone to be the director. Instead, the Iowa Legislature should eliminate the agency and delegate its responsibilities to another agency.

As of next month, the drug policy office will have four employees. That's right: four. One of them will be the new director. Iowa's so-called drug

czar will collect \$90,000 from taxpayers and receive generous fringe benefits to oversee three people. State lawmakers allocated about \$240,000 in the coming budget year for the agency, about \$100,000 less than the governor requested. Associate Director Dale Woolery said that means the office will have to cut its current staff of eight in half.

What does a state agency with so few employees do?

Originally established during the 1980s' "war on drugs," it focuses on drug prevention, treatment and enforcement. It facilitates collaboration between the private and public sectors and provides information about newly emerging problems, such as methamphetamine labs and synthetic drugs. That is all fine. Yet some of those functions could be met by private advocacy groups.

It is impossible to justify an entire agency, with its own highly paid director, dedicated

to drugs. It makes no more sense than dedicating an office to child abuse or illiteracy or any other social problem. The drug policy office serves no regulatory function. Relatively little federal grant money flows through it.

Nearly \$120 million in state and federal funding is dedicated this year to substance abuse and drug-enforcement programs in Iowa. Public Health received more than \$37 million. Human Services received about \$30 million. Corrections received \$9 million. The state office solely dedicated to focusing on drugs received \$5 million. That small amount could easily be received and doled out by another state agency.

If you asked state lawmakers today to create an agency with four employees dedicated to the "drug war," they wouldn't do it. Yet this is what Iowa has. Eliminating the agency and transferring its responsibilities to another state agency makes more sense.