

# Dual Role for HOMELAND SECURITY LEADER

Disaster Management Professor is also Chief of Staff in Washington D.C.

BY GENE PINDER

Calling it quite simply the best opportunity of his career, Dr. J. Bennet Waters couldn't resist

the chance to help start one of the most important offices within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security—the office of the Chief Medical Officer.

It has meant weekly commutes from his Durham, N.C., home to Washington, D.C., precious time away from his wife and two young children, and 14- to 16-hour workdays.

It's also meant endless meetings with other government officials, constant pressures in such a high-profile environment, and daily responses to potential homeland security threats.

Have we also mentioned that Waters, who has a master's degree in public health and a doctorate in health administration, is teaching a graduate course for the UNC School of Public Health's Department of Health Policy and Administration (HPAA) during this 2006-2007 academic year?

It's hectic, but the offer to become part of the Department of Homeland Security was just too good to pass up. He began his position in Washington D.C., in December 2005, just four months after starting his position as assistant professor and deputy director for executive programs in HPAA. He is now "on loan" to Homeland Security until December 2008. Prior to joining the School's faculty, Waters was president and chief operating officer for Piedmont Healthcare Management group in Charlotte, N.C. Before that, he was administrative director of the emergency department at Carolinas Medical Center, a Level-1 trauma center and academic teaching hospital in Charlotte.

"A year ago, who would have thought I would be spending time in the White House, meeting with Cabinet Secretaries and working on Capitol Hill?" Waters says. "It's just phenomenal."

It's no simple task either.

As chief of staff for Homeland Security's Chief Medical Officer, Waters must "make the trains run on time"—meaning he had to help develop a strategic plan for the office, build an enduring infrastructure, and execute the plan. He navigates the budgetary and fiscal waters of the federal government and deftly avoids turf battles to implement the vision of his boss and mentor, Dr. Jeffrey Runge.

"Using a private sector perspective, it's similar to a startup situation in



Dr. J. Bennet Waters

which one has an idea, gets some working capital and then builds a functional organization," Waters says.

The Office of the Chief Medical Officer has four primary responsibilities: (1) coordinate the department's biodefense activities; (2) ensure the department has a unified approach to medical preparedness; (3) develop and maintain workforce protection and occupational health standards for the department; and (4) serve as the Secretary of Homeland Security's principal medical advisor, providing real-time incident management guidance. For Waters, the experience gained in Washington will be invaluable in the classroom.

"I've developed my syllabi using a combination of personal experiences, a review of the literature and my ongoing engagement with the community preparedness and disaster management arenas," Waters says. "It's really exciting to be a part of both worlds."

Now, if he could just figure out a way to make both worlds be in the same location. ■



Dr. J. Bennet Waters (right) with his wife, Jane, and two daughters: Talbot, 2 (on Jane's lap), and Annie, 1, (on Bennet's lap).