

Local Health Departments Lead in Responding to COVID-19



By Kari Oldfield, LPHA Director

Responding to disasters and emergencies is a core responsibility of Minnesota's local public health departments. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our communities and every aspect of daily life, local public health plays a key role in responding to and mitigating the ongoing risks from the virus.

To most effectively respond, local public agencies throughout the state are leading in their incident command (IC) structures. In Dakota County, for example, their team of internal partners includes the sheriff's office, risk management, county communications and schools. IC structures allow for situational monitoring, planning, development of policies, and regular communication and partnership with nursing homes, congregate living facilities, hospitals and other partners.

Work throughout the state continues to support mental well-being. The Minneapolis Health Department has established a mental wellbeing team to understand how various populations are dealing with COVID-19 and are developing messages to respond. They are also providing grant funding to community organizations, to expand community capacity to respond to COVID-19. Countryside Public Health, on the other hand, has started using social media to share creative wellness messages and activities with the community.

Sharing of accurate information is critically important during a pandemic. Local agencies are sharing information both internally and with external partners. They are active members of their regional healthcare coalitions and communicate regularly with local healthcare providers. Many agencies have launched local COVID-19 hotlines to connect constituents with accurate information and local resources. In Carver County for example, the local response hotline is connecting community members with local information and resources including where to access food resources, childcare, and mental health supports.



Polk County Public Health Virtual (PCPH) Situational Awareness Virtual Briefing.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is an ongoing challenge as supplies are being depleted quickly. Local agencies have been completing inventories of their equipment, fit-tested staff to ensure equipment will properly protect those wearing it and are working to obtain more PPE as it is available. Norman-Mahnomen public health is using social media channels to call for community members to donate their PPE, including homemade masks, for use both within the agency and to distribute to the public.



Norman-Mahnomen Public Health staff (including Sandy Boman, shown here) has been conducting "PPE fit testing" (making sure masks and respirators fit properly to insure proper protection) for White Earth Home Health, Mahnomen Sheriff's Office, Mahnomen Police Department and EMS.

As testing for COVID-19 ramps up, local public health will play a key role in setting up testing sites, administering tests, and notifying individuals of their test results. With an increase in testing, local agencies will play a critical role in completing investigations of the contacts of those who have tested positive for COVID-19. In Olmsted County, for example, they are looking at where outbreaks are happening to understand how the virus is traveling and who is impacted to prevent further spread.

Agencies focus on applying an equity lens to ensure disparities are not created or exacerbated and play a key role in collecting and framing data to ensure a recovery that lifts everyone up. In Wright County, they are working to apply an equity lens to all their COVID-19 response work, by assigning specific staff to ensure that people who experience inequities have equitable access to health, medical and financial information, resources and services.

Quarantine and isolation are key tools to preventing the spread of COVID-19. Local agencies oversee, regularly communicate with, and provide resources to those who are in quarantine. For those who are in quarantine, agencies assist with basic needs such as home food delivery and prescription delivery. Additionally, those members of our communities who are experiencing homelessness are at particular risk for being infected with and transmitting COVID-19. In counties throughout the state including St. Louis, Hennepin, and Beltrami, they have worked with local hotels to get spaces for those residents experiencing homelessness.



Watsonwan County Public Health shared this message on social media.

Local agencies have long standing relationships in their communities that are more important now than ever. Local health departments are leading on education, working to understand people's basic needs, and completing regular outreach to organizations and groups in the community. As the pandemic continues, local health departments will continue to be a key resource to their communities and will explore innovative ways to operate in an era of social distancing. ■

Blue Ribbon Committee on County Government Operations

AMC is convening a Blue Ribbon Committee on County Operations in order to examine the lessons learned about county government operations during the COVID-19 emergency and recommend ongoing operational changes that provide more effective and efficient service to Minnesotans by asking the following questions:

1. What new processes did counties try? What worked and should continue? What didn't work?
2. What work didn't get done during the emergency? What were the ramifications of not doing that work? Are there things counties could/should stop doing because they weren't critical during the pandemic?
3. Who has authority to make any recommended changes permanent? Do we need state or federal waivers or law changes and/or best practice recommendations for county boards?

The Blue Ribbon Committee will ask AMC's affiliate organizations to review their area of practice and bring lessons learned to the committee for discussion and consideration. The Blue Ribbon Committee will meet one to two times per week through May using video meeting technology to develop a preliminary list of recommendations and actions to accomplish them. The committee may continue to meet throughout the summer on a less frequent basis.

Blue Ribbon Committee Members:

- Rich Sve, AMC President & Lake County Commissioner, Chair
- Ben DeNucci, Itasca County Commissioner
- Lisa Fobbe, Sherburne County Commissioner
- Marion Greene, Hennepin County Commissioner
- Stephen Hallan, Pine County Commissioner
- Gary Hendrickx, Swift County Commissioner
- Sheila Kiscaden, Olmsted County Commissioner
- Colleen Landkamer, Blue Earth County Commissioner
- Jim McDonough, Ramsey County Commissioner
- Susan Morris, Isanti County Commissioner
- Lee Rogness, Otter Tail County Commissioner
- Scott Schulte, Anoka County Commissioner
- Mike Slavik, Dakota County Commissioner
- Jack Swanson, Roseau County Commissioner
- Dan Wildermuth, Pipestone County Commissioner

Staff Support:

- Julie Ring, Executive Director
- Ryan Erdmann, Member Engagement Coordinator
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