

# Lancaster New Era

## Coordination a big plus, health dept. backers say

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By JACK BRUBAKER, New Era Staff Writer

Rolando Santiago supports a public health department in Lancaster County "for its role in coordinating and integrating services that otherwise are uncoordinated and fragmented."



Lack of coordination, he explained, "often leads to increased costs and inefficiencies, but most importantly, it leads to lower health outcomes."

Santiago, executive director of the Mennonite Central Committee U.S., headquartered in Akron, was one of 15 speakers at a hearing on a public health department held Monday by the Lancaster County Commissioners.

Only three speakers criticized the proposal. Most provided unqualified support.

Several echoed Santiago's concern.

For example, Jim Kelly, who directs SouthEast Lancaster Health Services in Lancaster City, said he supports a local department because of the "coordination it would allow among providers (of health services)."

A standing-room-only crowd, most of whom were health-care providers, endured three hours of testimony in the first major public policy hearing the commissioners have held since taking office in January.

The commissioners scheduled the hearing to collect information to help them decide whether to authorize a local health department to replace the state Department of Health.

Hilda Shirk, director of the United Way of Lancaster County initiative to form a local health department, has said that she will ask the commissioners to create such an agency by the end of this year.

All of the county's hospitals support a county health department, Shirk said.

Only one commissioner, Craig Lehman, has said he supports the plan. The others, Dennis Stuckey and Scott Martin, say they are gathering information toward making a decision.

The commissioners, especially Martin, closely questioned many of Monday's speakers.

Stuckey, formerly county controller, asked Shirk to provide the budgets of the six counties in Pennsylvania that operate their own health departments.

The budget proposed here is considerably smaller than budgets of the six

counties currently operating their own health departments.

"I think people want to make sure we don't turn into one of the larger-budgeted health-care counties," Martin observed.

Lehman offered an explanation for why most of those county operations are more expensive than projections for Lancaster County.

"Some counties have chosen to mix public health and health care," he said, explaining that health care itself would not be provided by a public health department here.

Mick Owens, president of the local chapter of the Pennsylvania Restaurant Association, asked the commissioners to consider "the long-term fiscal liability that taxpayers and businesses like restaurants could be asked to assume in outlying years."

Ron Harper Jr., of Stevens, said a county health department would not be helpful in a crisis because people here would see to their own families' welfare first. He said "top-down emergency management" on the state level is the only way to handle such emergencies.

Randall Gockley, the county's emergency management director, acknowledged that the county "could be overwhelmed" if faced with a major health crisis. He maintained that a county health department would help prepare for such emergencies.

Those testifying on behalf of the health department plan included Albert Duncan, CEO of Thomas E. Strauss; Dale High, chairman of the High Companies; and Dr. Jeffrey Martin, president of the Lancaster City Board of Health.

Idette Groff, chair of a League of Women Voters task force that studied and supports the issue, said a public health department is "long overdue for Lancaster."

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▪ County commissioners hear three hours of public comment -- mostly favorable -- in first public policy hearing on plan.