

Group seeking county support for health department

Commissioners expected to vote Wednesday to request Pa. certificate, a step toward establishing countywide department.

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Local hospitals, doctors and others who support the creation of a public health department in Lancaster County are seeking preliminary approval from the Lancaster County Commissioners.

Specifically, the Partnership for a County Public Health Department is asking the commissioners to request a state certificate of approval so that the county can formally consider establishing its own health department, separate from the state's department.

The action, by itself, would not establish a health department here.

"Securing this certificate, however, is a signal from the State Department of Health that there would be support for our efforts if we were to make a future decision to establish a local department," said Hilda Shirk, the partnership's project manager.

Shirk said discussions with the three commissioners over the past two months have persuaded her that the preliminary request will obtain majority approval.

She was discussing the issue with the commissioners this morning at the New Era's deadline. The commissioners will not vote formally until next Wednesday's regular meeting.

"We feel that at this point we have strong community support to move this to a new level and to continue our exploration," Shirk told the commissioners.

The United Way of Lancaster County initiated the public health department plan in 2005.

A Drexel University feasibility study found that such a department could work here, and the United Way hired Shirk nearly a year ago to help move the plan forward.

Shirk, who has a doctoral degree in business administration-management, has worked exclusively in health and human services.

In her current post, she has concentrated on how a county health department would coordinate existing health services, how it would be financed and educating the public on the need for public-health services.

If the commissioners approve the request for a certificate of approval and the state grants it, Shirk said this morning, she will spend the next year educating the public about the need for a public department here.

A new board of commissioners then would be asked to consider actually establishing a department.

There are definite public-health needs in the county, she said.

Only about half of county mothers receive adequate prenatal care, according to partnership studies, and the infant death rate exceeds the state rate. The local death rate for children ages 1 to 4 is 50 percent higher than the state rate.

Illness from vaccine-preventable diseases and sexually transmitted diseases are rising here, according to the partnership. Local death rates from stroke, asthma and melanoma are worse than the state rate.

While health services provided here are solid, Shirk told the commissioners, a "scattered approach to health safety could be improved if we were given the opportunity to manage it locally rather than in Harrisburg."

Establishing a new county department would cost \$1.5 million the first year, according to the partnership, but most of that money would come from the state so that "there would be minimal effect on the county treasury."

Conversations with health-care providers, environmentalists, farmers business people, educators and other county residents, Shirk said, has persuaded her that support for a county health department is strong.

"We believe that we can deliver a plan for a health department that builds on the existing strengths of this county and its providers, without creating a huge bureaucracy or committing significant county dollars or duplicating services already provided," she said.

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