

Lancaster New Era

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By JACK BRUBAKER, New Era Staff Writer

The 5-year-old boy fell violently ill following a vacation trip to New England.

His worried parents consulted medical experts. Tests confirmed that their son had contracted E. coli. Doctors told the parents to contact health departments in New England and Pennsylvania.

Within four days, a county health department in New England had located the source of the problem -- a petting zoo -- and had removed the infectious animal and notified anyone who had come in contact with it.

Within the same time, the Pennsylvania Department of Health finally returned the parents' call and requested basic information.

A health department in Lancaster County would have acted faster than the state, Sharon Greelish Cody, mother of the 5-year-old, planned to argue at a hearing before the Lancaster County Commissioners this afternoon.



"The horror of his illness has not left me," Cody planned to say about her family's ordeal. "Nor has the horror of realizing how poorly prepared Lancaster was to deal with a public health emergency."

Cody, executive director of the foundation representing the county's 200 osteopathic physicians, was one of six speakers scheduled to read testimony at the hearing. Impromptu comments also will be permitted.

The commissioners -- all three of whom took office in January -- planned the hearing to gather commentary about a county health department before deciding whether to begin one.

The United Way of Lancaster County launched an effort to create a local department in 2004. It hired Hilda Shirk the next year to direct the Partnership for a County Public Health Department -- a group of local health-care providers supporting the initiative.

As a candidate in last autumn's election campaign, Commissioner Craig Lehman said he supports a county health department. In their own campaigns, Commissioners Dennis Stuckey and Scott Martin said it would create another layer of bureaucracy that the county does not need.

This is the only hearing the commissioners plan to hold on the issue.

Shirk said there is "no timetable" for asking the commissioners to make a decision. The earliest a department could begin functioning, she explained, would be next January.

In her testimony, Shirk planned to estimate that a county health department would cost \$1.5 million the first year, with the county contributing \$110,000 and the state picking up the rest. In the fifth year, the county would contribute \$185,000 toward a \$1.86 million budget.

Others who responded to the commissioners' public call for testimony are Randall S. Gockley, Albert E. Duncan, Dale High and Dr. Jeffrey R. Martin. Each submitted written remarks in advance of the hearing.

Gockley, the county's emergency management coordinator, was the only scheduled speaker who is neutral. The others support a county department.

Gockley planned to say that while the state health department works well with his agency, "the additional staff and expertise of a local health department will assist in maintaining the health and safety of our citizens."

Gockley's testimony cites two areas in which a county health department would be particularly helpful: coordinating the distribution of oral medicines in a major health crisis, and assuming leadership in a pandemic flu outbreak.

Duncan, CEO of Thomas E. Strauss, umbrella organization for Miller's Smorgasbord and other tourist operations, planned to say that the county needs its own health department to protect public food and water.

"Our local economy would suffer terribly if tourists were afraid to eat in our restaurants or sleep in our hotels," he wrote in his advance testimony.

High, chairman of the High Companies, planned to say that a local health department's focus on prevention of disease "will improve the health of employees and reduce absenteeism."

Martin, president of the Lancaster City Board of Health, planned to discuss how a county health department would address public health issues such as lead poisoning in children more effectively than the state.

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▪ County Commissioners gather comments at hearing as they weigh proposal to create new department.