

Why does Lancaster County need a public health department?

The short answer is to improve our health. Research has shown that Pennsylvania counties with a local public health department are doing better at reaching national health goals, particularly in the areas of cancer and heart disease.

Doesn't Lancaster already have a public health department?

Not a locally governed and administered one. Currently the PA Departments of Health, Agriculture, and Environmental Protection provide public health services from their local and regional offices. They provide most of the essential services mandated by law, but admit that they are short staffed and unable to do all that could be done to promote public health.

What is public health? Isn't it health care for poor people?

Public health is government oversight to assure protection from health-related threats. It involves tracking and investigating health problems and hazards in the community, preparing for and responding to health emergencies like pandemic flu or bio-terrorism, improving access to health services, and delivering health education for healthy lifestyles. Health care for people who can't afford costly care is provided by hospitals and clinics supported through federal, state, and benevolent funds.

What are the concerns in Lancaster County that are not adequately addressed?

A major concern is the high number of children who have high levels of toxic lead in their blood. In the city, 10% of the children who are tested are at risk of illness or brain damage. Lead poisoning generally comes from old lead-based paint in our homes. We need a system-wide approach that not only does a better job of screening children for lead poisoning, but also develops policies and procedures to clean up the lead in our homes.

Illness from vaccine preventable diseases is on the rise in this county, as are sexually transmitted diseases like gonorrhea and chlamydia. We need a comprehensive approach to make sure that everyone understands how to prevent these diseases and has access to the vaccines and services needed.

Restaurant inspections throughout most of the county are the responsibility of the PA Department of Agriculture. They have indicated that they are understaffed and are not

able to fully protect the public from the risk of food borne illnesses. Given our significant tourist industry we need to be particularly confident that our eating establishments are safe. We would be better served by a local department that can assure timely and consistent inspections, with good support for our restaurateurs.

Another significant concern is coordination and management of a serious public health emergency like a pandemic flu or bio or agri-terrorism event. Health care providers and emergency response organizations have a role to play in the response to such events, but the County currently would need to rely on the PA Dept of Health to manage the crisis. Unfortunately, they would probably be pulled in many directions and Lancaster County could be floundering at a time when it would need clear and strong direction. A local public health department, with a physician in charge, could provide that.

What are the benefits of creating a local department?

As I said earlier, it will improve our health. In addition,

- It will put the control and responsibility for addressing public health issues in our hands at the local level, rather than relying on decision-making in Harrisburg.
- It will eliminate fragmentation and streamline government. As I mentioned earlier, there are three state departments that are responsible for public health – the health department, agriculture, and the dept. of environmental protection. Locally, we would address all those concerns from one office.
- It will increase access to federal and state funds that are available only to public health departments for education programs, emergency preparedness, and other critical health concerns. As tax payers, we're paying those dollars already, but they are not coming back into Lancaster County like they could if we had a health department.
- It would improve efficiency and reduce duplication through coordination and coalition-building. We have many wonderful government, private, and volunteer providers of health services in this county and we don't want to eliminate them or duplicate what they are already doing, but we do need to make sure there aren't gaps in the services they are providing; we don't want some areas or populations not able to access services, so we need to work together.

Will this add more government interference in our lives and more regulations?

Actually, the regulations stay the same as what we currently have from the state and federal government or from municipalities. So, it's not more government; it's a shift to county government.

Won't this cost a lot of money and make taxes go up?

Because we have so many healthcare providers already doing such a great job in Lancaster, we don't need to create a big department. The cost per year will only be about \$1.7 million. Actually, there is a law in Pennsylvania that says that if a local community establishes a health department, the state is obligated to pay for at least half of the cost. The rest of the money comes from fees that are charged for some of the environmental services, from grants, and about 10% from the county budget. That's less than \$.35 per person in Lancaster County. Some would say that's a bargain.

How would we establish a health department in Lancaster?

When the local economy is a bit stronger, we will be asking the County Board of Commissioners to use their authority to create a department. They are very interested in how this would benefit the county and held a formal public hearing last year to hear from those folks who are in support of the idea and those opposed. We are facing some tough economic times, so they will need to consider the opportunities this would give the county to access new dollars to improve the health of the community.

Who is behind this effort?

A partnership of organizations and people concerned about securing the public health of our community. Funding support is from all four hospitals – Ephrata Community, Heart, Lancaster General, and Regional, as well as from Lancaster Osteopathic Health Foundation, St. Joseph Health Ministries, and the United Way of Lancaster.

Where can I get more information about this?

On the United Way website at uwlanc.org. Click on Community Solutions in the menu bar across the top to find the link to Partnership for a County Public Health Department.