

# Lake County Board of Health

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Director of Health Services

Lake County is located in the scenic Mission Valley area of western Montana, and encompasses 1,494 square miles. The total county population is 26,507. Much of the Flathead Reservation is located in Lake County, and the American Indian population numbers 6,306. (Population data is from 2002 Montana County Health Profiles). The town of Polson is the county seat.

The Lake County Board of Health membership consists of four members at large and two of the three current county commissioners, for a total of six voting members. Members at-large are appointed by the commissioners and serve for staggered three year terms set by the commissioners. Ex-officio members who regularly attend the quarterly meetings include the County Health Officer, and the department directors for environmental health and public health. In addition to the quarterly meetings, the board of health holds additional meetings for public hearings on variance requests for septic systems or other matters. The directors for environmental health and public health usually see that the board of health dates are set and the agenda is formulated collaboratively between the two departments.

When a vacancy needs to be filled, the at-large position is advertised in the weekly area newspaper, and interested individuals are asked to respond with a letter to the county commissioners, who then make the appointment to fill the vacancy if the candidate is suitable.

Our current health officer is a practicing physician, a Doctor of Osteopathy, and has a PhD. He serves in the health officer capacity via a contractual agreement. This agreement is renewed annually. Lake County provides liability coverage for performance of his duties as health officer, but the health officer maintains professional liability coverage for his independent work activities. The health officer has no regular working hours other than attendance at the board of health meetings, and serves as an advisor and signatory to the public health and environmental health departments. The environmental health and public health department directors consult with the health officer as needed. Most informal communication from the health officer to the board of health and/or the county commissioners comes through the directors of the environmental health and public health departments.

Programmatic decisions and policies within the departments are usually made through meetings with the county commissioners without the involvement of the board of health, which serves the public health and environmental health department heads in an advisory capacity. The board of health is not administratively involved with budget development, budget approval, or operations; this function lies with the county commissioners. The county commissioners oversee and approve the annual budgets for the public health and environmental health departments, and the department heads formally report directly to the commissioners regarding budgetary and programmatic issues.

Currently, the board of health is involved with monitoring the development of a joint county-tribal Biting Animal Program which involves a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), protocols and contract agreements between the county and the tribes as well as three incorporated towns within the county/reservation boundaries.

In the past, response to animal bites in Lake County and on the reservation has been done by a number of different responders depending on where the incident took place. The county has a vicious animal ordinance in place which recognizes only dogs. The three incorporated towns in Lake County and on the reservation—Polson, Ronan, and St. Ignatius—respond independently to animal bites within their city limits. The cities of Polson and Ronan each have a part-time designated animal control officer, but both officers agree that resources are limited. The tribe has an ordinance and a designated animal control officer who can officially respond only to animal bites occurring on the Tribal Housing Authority's grounds—a limited area in the vicinity of Pablo.

The board of health recognizes that response to animal bite incidents within the county and on the reservation is inconsistent due to complex jurisdictional issues, limited resources, and a county ordinance that is limited to dog bites. To address these problems, a series of meetings between county, city, and tribal officials has taken place over the summer months. A county commissioner, the Polson and Ronan animal control officer, the county public health and environmental health services directors, Tribal Housing Authority personnel, and the tribal animal control officer have attended these meetings. They have drafted an MOU which expresses a desire to work together to develop a common protocol for handling animal bites within our communities.

When finalized, this will certainly be a success story. It will provide consistent response to animal bite incidents in Lake County, whether the incident occurs inside city limits, on reservation land, or on fee, allotment, trust or lease lands. Rabies prevention is the driving public health concern, and the revised ordinance will address not only dogs, but also cats and ferrets. Resources will be increased because of the partnering commitment between the county, the tribe and the incorporated towns. Public health will be an integral part of the protocol loop, providing for better management of follow-up with the medical community. While much of the collaborative work has taken place at the ground level, the board of health has been involved in following the progress and will give final approval of the agreement and the revised ordinance.