Sweet Grass City-County Board of Health

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County Health Nurse

The board of health for Sweet Grass County is actually a City-County Board of Health. The board is comprised of all three county commissioners, the mayor of the City of Big Timber and one city council member, appointed to the board by the mayor.

The board holds regular monthly meetings over lunch at a local restaurant. Special meetings, when called, are held at the county commissioners' office. Special meetings may be called by a board member or a public health official (such as the county health officer, county health nurse, or county sanitarian).

The board is updated each month on public health in the county through the reports of the public health officials. The local health officials communicate as needed between board meetings. The sanitarian and health nurse are county employees and as such, answer to the county commissioners. The county health officer is a physician's assistant at the local medical clinic (a county facility) and is not paid for his services as health officer. Historically, the county health officer has been mostly involved in communicable disease investigation and signing the immunization orders for the health department. Public health authority rests primarily with the board of health, however, some authorities are held by the health officer according to state statute. Activities through which pubic health policy is carried out are delegated to the health officials and are dictated by Montana law.

The role of the local board of health has evolved, as there has been a greater focus on public health across Montana and the United States. A few years ago, the monthly meetings usually consisted of a sanitarian's report, a nurse's report and then perhaps consideration of a septic system waiver request. As public health emergency plans have been developed and local health officials have become aware of increasing responsibilities, the board of health has become more of a policy setting body.

The work of the local board of health that stands out most to me right now is the development of the public health emergency plan. This plan is a product of efforts by the board of health, local health officials and the members of the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC). The plan demonstrates an incredible ability to work together and overcome obstacles to protect the health and safety of our citizens. I think we can be really proud of what's been accomplished.

Our LEPC includes representatives from the sheriff's office, disaster and emergency services, county road department, U.S. Forest Service, a local veterinarian, Big Timber City Council, volunteer fire department, county commissioners, public health, EMS/ambulance, public information officer, and Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. Other agencies have participated as well, depending on the topic to be covered.

Essentially, the LEPC plans for the management of emergencies and reviews the event to improve emergency plans and performance. The LEPC's experience base and context has been integral to the development of Sweet Grass County's public health emergency plan. The LEPC's knowledge of emergency management involving multiple agencies and the incident command system were particularly helpful during the development of the public health emergency plan. The LEPC provides an excellent opportunity to build relationships and develop skills beforehand that are crucial to effective emergency management. The public health emergency plan was funded by the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services through a cooperative grant with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.