

## **Yellowstone City-County Board of Health**

Billings, Montana

By Lil Anderson, RN, Director/Health Officer

Yellowstone City-County Health Department is a multi-jurisdictional health service district which was created in 1998. It is a governmental entity created by ordinances of Yellowstone County, the City of Billings and the City of Laurel establishing an interlocal agreement between the three entities. That agreement allowed the creation of a public health department under Title 50 and the creation of a health services department under Title 7, Montana Code Annotated. The board of health is comprised of 12 members each serving a three year term. Two members are appointed by the Yellowstone County Commissioners, two members are appointed by the Billings Mayor with approval of the Billings City Council; one member is appointed by the Laurel Mayor with approval of the Laurel City Council; the remaining seven members are board of health appointments. Vacant board-appointed positions are advertised, applicants are interviewed by a board committee with recommendations made to the full board for a vote. Governmental positions are filled according to regulation or protocol of the appointing unit. The board of health elects a Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary-Treasurer for one year terms. There is no limit on number of terms for board positions or elected office.

Although it is not required that a county commissioner serve on the board of health in an official capacity, one representative from the commission has filled a county appointed slot since creation of the health district. Quite often two commissioners are in attendance and on occasion all three Yellowstone County Commissioners attend the monthly board of health meetings. Informal communication is constant between the commission and the health officer as public health business is conducted; formal sessions are scheduled with commissioners and appropriate board of health members if necessary. The board of health employs the Chief Executive Officer/Health Officer who reports directly to them.

The health officer continues to fill the role of lead local public health official at the present time. We are in the process of hiring a Director of Public Health with the intent of transferring responsibility and accountability to that person. As Montana law requires the health officer to relate and report to the board of health, the overall information and communication will continue to flow between the health officer, the board of health and the county commissioners as necessary. It is unclear how much of the role can actually be delegated, and we will be learning as we develop a new role in this department and community.

The Yellowstone City-County Board of Health is the governing, policy-setting and operating board for the health department. They are a progressive, risk-taking board that establishes the long-term vision of a public health and health services district for Yellowstone County. They evaluate and make decisions for assistance and service outside of Yellowstone County upon request.

The board of health is definitely a policy-setting group. The board has a balance of private business, governmental, educational, medical and legal representation, their

deliberations and strategic policy decisions establish a strong basis for current and future public health activities in this region.

The best example of a successful Board of Health project was the positive vote for a mill levy increase for public health services in Yellowstone County. Our department was funded at historically low levels for its entire existence. Due to I-105 and other legislative restrictions, the only way to increase resources for the health department was to request an increase in local taxes. The Board of Health held two strategic planning meetings before deciding to request the additional mills. It created a corporate structure to raise funds to support the effort; contracted for a survey research project to determine the possibility of success and completed community education sessions. The board conducted numerous education sessions, newspaper and TV interviews, a door-to-door talking campaign, and yard signage activities in order to pass the mill levy. There were approximately 48,000 votes cast in the November, 2002 election— we passed the levy by 28 votes!

The mill levy approved by Yellowstone County voters in November 2002 will provide an additional one million dollars to the annual budget beginning in November 2003. This amount may vary from year to year depending on the change in the value of a mill. These dollars will provide additional services in the areas of environmental health, disease control, family health, maternal child health, private duty program, school nurse program, visiting nurse services, health promotion and public health services. These services will include an increase in restaurant/pool/subdivision inspections, immunizations and sexually transmitted disease (STD) testing, case management for senior and family services, health promotions to link patients to needed health services, low income in-home personal care services and others.

The mill levy election represents a true success story!