

State may realign public health

Possible changes may mirror mental health services

By JIM RUDISILL
Staff Writer
WAPELLO — The Louisa County Public Health Service had a busy FY 2024, according to an annual report reviewed and adopted by the Louisa County Board of Health at its April 8 meeting.

Public health re-alignment?
Public Health Administrator Leah McElhinney also updated the board of health on public health re-alignment discussions in the state.

According to her report and previous updates, the state is looking to consolidate state oversight of the local public health system in Iowa, following a similar re-alignment completed with mental/behavior health services.

McElhinney reported the most recent discussions indicated a regional/district model may be developed, although individual county public health systems would apparently still operate.

This shared-responsibility model would still need legislative action, which she indicated would

not be considered until next year. Under the proposed model, there would be a lead agency identified in each district that would be responsible for ensuring all required services are offered in that area.

“It doesn’t have to be a public health agency, but it potentially is going to be,” she told the board, saying those services would apparently continue to be funded through each local public health service.

“How I see it working for our agency, is not much change,” McElhinney said, adding it was still uncertain how local boards of health would function or if they would even continue to operate under the possible realignment.

If local boards of health are eliminated, McElhinney pointed out that would remove a substantial amount of local input into a county’s public health system.

Maine was skeptical of that possibility. “I don’t think they will do that,” he said.

Services offered
McElhinney, who completed the annual report, summarized its key sections for the board of health, including personnel listings, public health services, home health services and financial details.

The home health services section of the annual report covered

skilled nursing, home health aide/homemaker and newborn home visiting provided by Louisa County Public Health Service.

Skilled nursing continued to be provided through a Medicare certified program that served any county resident, regardless of their ability to pay. Registered nurses provided home care for medical problems including heart failure, diabetes and chronic respiratory problems.

In addition to receiving reimbursement for services through private insurance, Medicaid and Medicare, public health also received financial support from a Milestone grant and funding from the Community Foundation of Louisa County.

The public health home health aide/homemaker staff provided a wide variety of services, including showers, bed baths, shampoo, skin care, assistance with dressing, light housekeeping, laundry, errands and meal prep.

Although there has been little participation in public health’s newborn home visiting program, McElhinney said the service is still offered, and hopefully more referrals will be made.

Services provided through this program include maternal postpartum and newborn assessments, breastfeeding support, free infant

safety equipment and other activities.

Report details
The public health section of the report included discussions on the 2023 Louisa County Community Health Needs Assessment/Health Improvement Plan. Health priorities identified in the plan were health issues, preventable injuries and infrastructure issues.

According to the report, information obtained through the assessment was used to develop a five-year health improvement plan for the county. Activities identified in that plan were continued throughout FY 2024.

Louisa County Public Health Service also worked on emergency preparedness, including Health Alert Network testing, pandemic influenza preparation and working with Louisa County Emergency Management Agency to evaluate where medications could be dispensed in the case of emergency.

Louisa County Public Health Service also continued communicable disease surveillance through communications with public health, private physicians, schools, nursing homes and the Iowa Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). McElhinney told the board the report included discussions on the county’s TB

infection monitoring, immunizations and environmental health.

Financial and environmental
The final section of the report dealt with FY 24 financial information. According to the report, the LCPHS generated \$363,045 in revenue and expended \$691,862. The actual amount of county funding provided was \$328,817. The county funding had been projected to be \$387,375,

She said the annual report will be posted on the LCPHS website.

McElhinney also reported a change in submitting state payments methods for well permitting under environmental health activities. She said the state receives a portion of the permit fee, and currently the auditor issues a quarterly check.

However the Iowa Department of Natural Resources is now requesting an online payment system. McElhinney said auditor Susan Schnedler was reluctant to provide the necessary account numbers for that system.

As a possible option, McElhinney said a credit card could be used. Board of health chair and county supervisor Shawn Maine said he would talk with Schnedler about the payment method.

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hasn’t come to a head.”

The supervisors had set the termination date at its March 25 meeting, after agreeing that service revenue set by the state did not meet expenses and that the driving portion of the service caused significant stress for office workers.

Maine had reported that most comments he heard had been criticisms of the March 25 decision. He had agreed to talk with Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) officials and others to learn if alternatives to a full termination of services might be available.

April 8, Maine indicated little progress with state officials but said he had learned more about the licensing process by talking with treasurer’s office staff. “There’s quite a bit more than I realized,” he said, giving the example of behind-the-scenes work to verify information before a license can be issued.

Maine said he had learned that when a person comes in to renew or obtain a license, the staff asks if the applicant is on any medication. If the response is “yes,” an office worker must then conduct their own internet search to determine if that medication can cause any reaction that might be detrimental to driving.

“You would think there ought to be a state website they could go to, type (that medication) in, and it would roll over and

give you a red box or a green box or whatever,” he said. “Something really simple. Oh no, that’s not there. They have to Google search it. Now, how stupid is that?”

“It’s way time-consuming,” Frank agreed.

Maine said he had contacted Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) officials, including an email exchange joined by Iowa House Representative Taylor Collins. Maine asked the DOT to consider if the county could drop the driver’s portion of the service and only offer license renewal.

“They politely said no,” he reported. “It’s all or nothing. You are not picking and choosing.”

Maine said Collins tried to convince the DOT representative to accommodate the county, to no avail.

Maine also reported the state agency would not operate a mobile station in the county if the service was not offered through the treasurer’s office.

“I have another email drafted,” Maine continued. “I haven’t sent it yet, because I’m not sure they understand... what’s going on,” Maine told board members and about a dozen attendees in person and on Zoom.

“It’s a great service for the county, and you are making money for the county,” said Bill Poggemiller, rural Wapello.

Supervisor Kevin Hardin disagreed, saying the service cost \$25,000 more than it brought in.

He asked Poggemiller to compare the situation to a leaking propane tank. “If you were losing \$50 a month in propane, and you fixed that leak... how much are you going to save over the year? (It’s) the same thing here. We’re leaking money over there, and if we stop that, then we save that money,” Hardin argued.

“Do you judge every department that way?” Morning Sun rural resident Randy Foor asked Hardin. “If they make money or not, or how they make money?”

“We need to look at them,” Hardin replied. “I haven’t looked at every department yet.”

Supervisor Scot Hunt steered the conversation back to the state. “I went over and talked to the (treasurer’s office staff), too, and listening to them, a lot of the issue is the state does not provide them the training, is not providing them the background services they need, and I mean there is more to it than that, I believe,” he said.

Maine told attendees the county was holding steady on its plan to halt driver licensing in the treasurer’s office. “As it sets now,” the office will be closed on May 30, but he plans to continue “behind the scenes” discussions to try to identify a new option, he said.

In other action
During the April 8 meeting, the board:
■ Approved Sean Allworth to the Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission’s

Loan Review Committee;
■ Reviewed ambulance reports from Morning Sun, Wapello and Columbus Junction;

■ Reviewed third quarter reports from the sheriff, recorder and auditor’s offices;

■ Appointed Leanne Black to fill a vacant term on the County Judicial Magistrate Commission ending Dec. 31, 2026;

■ Agreed to a suggestion by Foor to recognize former Louisa County Sheriff Curt Braby at the April 15 meeting. Braby died April 3. Before retiring in 2010, he had served in the Louisa County Sheriff’s Office for 30 years, including as county sheriff for the 10 years before his retirement.

■ The board also met with county engineer Adam Shutt for his weekly secondary roads department update.

Shutt told the board that paving and other work in and around Grandview had started the day before and would eventually include work on old Highway 61 and 160th Street (Grandview Bypass). Other work has either started or will begin on County Roads X14 and G28.

■ Maine read a proclamation declaring April as Child Abuse Prevention Month. Arin Jones, a representative for Quad County CPPC (Community Partnership for Protecting Children), who attended the meeting by Zoom, reported a movie on preventing child abuse would be shown at 2 p.m. on April 11 at the Capitol Theater, Burlington.


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