



Lack of State Investment Threatens Public Health, Burdens Local Tax Levies

By Renee Frauendienst, Stearns County Public Health Division Director and LPHA Legislative Co-Chair and Allie Freidrichs, Meeker-McLeod-Sibley Community Health Services Administrator and LPHA Legislative Co-Chair

Local public health departments are on the front lines every day to protect and promote the health and safety of their communities. To do so successfully requires adequate, stable and flexible funding; but past funding cuts and shifting priorities at both state and federal levels have put our local public health system – and the health of our communities – at risk.

Talk to a public health director today, and you'll hear that mental health is consistently one of the most important health issues identified by Minnesota's community health boards, but local public health departments have too little capacity to effectively address it. Tuberculosis outbreaks are more common, but agencies are forced to hold referrals from too little staffing. Rates of sexually transmitted infections have increased, but there are too few resources for education and intervention. Schools are looking to public health as a partner to prevent youth alcohol, drug and opioid use; but there are not enough staff to do the work.

Stories like these can be found all over Minnesota. Local public health is our first line of defense at the core of our communities' health, but it is struggling and needs help.

To the credit of local government, counties and cities have made important investments in public health to try to fill the gap, but they can no longer continue to pour local resources into maintaining the system. Local tax levies are the single largest funding source of local public health, accounting for 32% (more than \$107 million) of all expenses in 2015. In total, nearly half (47%) of Minnesota's local public health expenses are locally generated. By contrast, 16% comes from the state; and of that, just 6% allows local officials flexibility and control to direct dollars where they are needed most.

This legislative session, the Local Public Health Association (LPHA) is calling on state lawmakers to support adequate, stable and flexible funding for Minnesota's community health boards to restore capacity for core, state-mandated services and address local public health priorities. We have three asks:

Increase funding to the Local Public Health Grant (HF614 / SF1144)

LPHA supports HF614/SF1144, which would increase funding to the Local Public Health Grant by \$37 million per year. The Local Public Health Grant is the state's main investment in local public health's state-mandated services and provides local governments local control to direct dollars to their public health priorities.

Increase Medical Assistance (MA) reimbursements for family home visits (HF1385 / SF1143)

LPHA supports HF1385/SF1143, which would increase the minimum MA reimbursement rate for all public health nurse family home visits to \$140 per unit, providing needed resources to maintain and strengthen programs throughout the state. Family home visiting is known to improve birth outcomes, prevent child maltreatment, promote healthy childhood development and foster self-sufficiency among our most at-risk families.

Maintain Statewide Health Improvement Partnership (SHIP) funding

LPHA supports maintaining SHIP funding at \$35 million per biennium. SHIP supports local communities working together to prevent the leading causes of death and disease in Minnesota and reduce health care costs. Funding goes to local community partners in all 87 counties and 10 tribal nations, with nearly 2,300 partner sites engaged.

The collective impact of these funding priorities would bring more capacity and more local control to local public health agencies throughout Minnesota for the benefit of our public's health. We look forward to working with our partners through the Association of Minnesota Counties to advance this agenda. ■

Minnesota Pensions Update

By Scott Moen, PEPSA Lobbyist

Keeping Minnesota's various pension systems healthy and thriving is one of the most important duties each year for the Minnesota State Legislature. Pension reforms and sustainability are key.

Many elected legislators and certainly much of the public do not understand the full weight and benefit of the four Minnesota Retirement Funds to counties and districts throughout the state. For instance, 2015 annual financial reports of the funds show nearly \$ 4 billion dollars paid out. PERA alone was at \$1.6 billion dollars. A huge financial impact for local counties and towns. This is a message we need to get out.

We often worry about what may happen each time a new majority leadership gains control of our legislature. If one looks around the country as to what is happening with pensions in other states many "defined benefit" systems are being dismantled. Many state systems are underfunded which leads to cutbacks in benefits to retirees.

At a recent meeting of the Legislative Commission on Pensions, Myron Frans, Commissioner of Minnesota Management and Budget, reviewed the contents of the Governor's budget that relate to the retirement plans this year. Governor Dayton has been the first Governor in over 30 years to propose real money into the pension system.

The hope is that this year's legislature follows suit and acknowledges the need for state funding to take care of the unfunded liabilities some of the funds are suffering. The most important need is to legislatively dedicate these funds and to continue Minnesota's long standing tradition of "defined benefit" pension systems. Even though we have many dedicated pension members and lobbyists (whom we need to support) working for these goals at the State Legislature it is still up to all of us to contact our legislators and voice our concerns.

As a public employee, you are a member of the Public Employees Retirement Association (PERA), and pay part of your salary into your retirement fund. PERA is regulated by the Legislature, and by law is restricted on lobbying. The Public Employees Pension Service Association (PEPSA) is a non-profit organization with a mission to protect and improve your pension, and act as a watchdog for your dollars invested in PERA.

PEPSA continues to advocate the need for ongoing improvements and protecting the plan. In the past the state has used our funds during tough economic times. The Association's goal is to keep its members informed and knowledgeable of potential changes to the plan and its funds and keeping our elected officials informed of PERA's needs. ■



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