



## Guest Column: Public health department would benefit all

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Three health status and public health resources reports from reputable universities and foundations give information to support the establishment of a fully functioning public health department in Delaware County.

One report shows that residents of Delaware County have mediocre health outcomes, such as average life expectancy and self-reported health conditions, ranking 36th of the 67 counties in the state.

Another report shows that our state government cannot be counted on to secure and manage money from their own budgets or the federal government to give basic health promotion and disease prevention services. Pennsylvania ranked 47th among the states in per-person dollars secured from federal government money available in disease control and health promotion. Similarly, the state budgets a low amount of per-person dollars to public health efforts ranking 39th among states.

Amidst these two reports, findings from a public-health assessment of Delaware County, commissioned by Delco public officials, show serious gaps in basic public-health services, lack of coordination of public-health services and information, and an overall inability to manage basic services to match a county this size. All surrounding counties in southeastern Pennsylvania have their own public-health departments.

It's understandable that at a time of economic hardship residents and budget planners are loath to fund additional government initiatives. Additionally, those with a "less government the better" posture may be thinking this is yet another entitlement for which they may not benefit. This is not true, as public-health services coming from a dedicated county department are true public goods with benefits shared by all residents. Three guiding functions of a public-health department are assessment, policy development, and assurance.

A guiding rationale of public health is that those at the local level are in the best position to determine what needs exist for the people (assessment). Why risk judgment from Harrisburg or Washington when our residents are better situated and acutely aware of public-health needs?

With our own public-health department, we could determine the information and services that are efficient and effective. Most successful public policy initiatives initially come from local municipalities and counties whose legislators generally bypass partisan politics and get to work on reasonable and responsible public health measures. Why wait for state legislators to intervene?

For example, cigarette vending machines were pulled from municipalities and counties well before state legislators could fathom this youth risk reduction measure. Drivers are asked to put down hand-held communication devices in some local towns, while the state legislators diddle with what is a common-sense law that clearly reduces risk of death and injury on our roads.

We are aware now more than ever of the need for quick emergency response to natural and human-caused catastrophes and threats. Public health and safety assurance is best handled, even if initially, at the local level.

Emergency medical, public health, and health education specialists have retooled their knowledge and skills to assure that public-health information and services are delivered in a timely manner.

Some critical of public-health departments claim they serve only the select few who need a “safety net.” Public-health actions and benefits are all around us — a county health department has proved to be worthwhile for all residents. Public-health services the population needs range from preventing and controlling infectious diseases or ensuring safe food handling and distribution, to individual needs such as maternal and child health care or violence-prevention programs, to risk reduction guidance such as barriers for outdoor pools or poison control hotlines.

Balancing public sector budgets and arguing the merits of legislative bills can be tiring for all involved. Citizens at any level truly do not wish ill health to others. Let’s hope the discussions and debate in this are civil and stately.

A great Roman statesman, Marcus Tullius Cicero, often reminded his Senate: “Ollis salus populi supreme lex esto — The safety (health) of the people shall be the highest law.”

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