



**AITKIN
COUNTY**
EST 1857
HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
COUNTY BOARD MEETING MINUTES
May 26, 2020

Attendance

The Aitkin County Board of Commissioners met this 26th day of May, 2020, at 9:02 a.m. as the Aitkin County Health & Human Services Board, with the following members present: Commissioners Bill Pratt, J. Mark Wedel, Don Niemi, and Laurie Westerlund. Commissioner Anne Marcotte attended remotely via video and phone. Others present included: H&HS Director Cynthia Bennett, County Administrator Jessica Seibert, Assistant to the County Administrator Angie Sahr, Public Health Supervisor Erin Melz and Financial Assistance Supervisor Jessi Goble, who both attended via video conference, and Jennifer Eisenbart, Aitkin Independent Age, who attended via phone.

Agenda

Motion by Commissioner Wedel, seconded by Commissioner Niemi and carried, all members present voting yes to approve the May 26, 2020 Health & Human Services Board agenda.

Minutes

Motion by Commissioner Westerlund, seconded by Commissioner Marcotte and carried, all members present voting yes to approve the April 28, 2020 Health and Human Services Board minutes.

Bills

Motion by Commissioner Wedel, seconded by Commissioner Niemi and carried, all members present voting yes to approve the bills.

HHS Staff Acknowledgement

Commissioner Pratt noted that he had received a letter from the State Commissioner of DHS and in it the Commissioner commended the Aitkin HHS staff for perfect performance in meeting the DHS financial reporting requirements for calendar year 2019.

He added his congratulations on behalf of himself and the County Board.

Cynthia commented that it takes a team effort for the reports to get in on time and she thanked the Board members for their recognition.

Health & Human Services Director Report, Cynthia Bennett, ACH&HS Director

Directors Update

Cynthia began by noting that the legislative session had ended last week with many frustrations and lacks of outcomes.

The session started with COVID-19 focused logistical and process challenges that were quickly addressed through partisan action. There was \$553 million in funding delegated to COVID-19 response, however in April there was a change in mood and an increase in tensions. The parties differed in how the response to the COVID-19 crisis should be managed and spent time debating the governor's emergency powers and lifting the stay-at-home order. An agreement on how to approach limiting executive authority and passing omnibus bills remained elusive.

In addition, conversations around CARE's Act dollars hit stumbling blocks with disagreements with how those dollars would be distributed to counties. The Senate had one proposal and the House had another and they were not able to reach a consensus or compromise before the end of the session.

She also noted that she had heard there would be a special session and that the Governor notified the Senate majority leader that it would begin on June 12th.

She went on to say that specifically related to the AMC HHS Policy Committee priorities that those seemed to have gotten lost in the shuffle. Thus far funding has been secured and we have been sent monies. There were also over 50 waivers that were enacted to change the programmatic mandates to better serve our constituents. This included-

- Telehealth, allowing the ability to do phone or video interviews with people instead of having to meet face to face.
- Preserving the Minnesota health care coverage MA and MnCare.
- Allowing continual enrollment and suspending sanctions for cash assistance.
- Allowing child care assistance payments to providers who didn't have children attending their daycares.

The Omnibus HHS Policy Bill passed and that focused on-

- Practical changes
- Cleaning up language
- Getting rid of non-pertinent items
- Better aligning the language with what is happening in practice.

She also added that the following bills passed-

- Tobacco 21 – Requiring everyone who purchases tobacco or nicotine to be 21 years old.
- Insulin Affordability Act – Established two safety nets for insulin dependent diabetics.
 - One based on an emergency supply for 30 days.
 - The other based on ongoing supplies for individuals/State Residents who meet the financial qualifications outlined in the bill.
- Drug Pricing Transparency – Requires pharmaceutical companies to report pricing information to the state if it has been above or exceeded the level that's outlined in the bill in addition to requiring MDH to post that information on their public website.

COVID-19 Update, Erin Melz, Public Health Supervisor

Erin continued by first echoing her appreciation for all of the Aitkin County employees who have gone above and beyond for the county and their communities.

She went on by giving a brief situational update on COVID-19.

There are 21,315 positive cases of COVID-19 in the state.

There have been 881 deaths due to COVID-19, 717 of which, have been in long term care facilities.

3 Counties have yet to report their first case of COVID-19.

Aitkin County has 7 confirmed cases and 0 deaths.

On average the state is testing 7,000 people per day.

This past weekend there were 6 free testing events at various armories around the state and the goal was to test 2,000 people per day at each site.

She went on to talk about the Governor's announcement last week that on June 1st, bars and restaurants may open to customers for outdoor seating and by reservation only. Along with that hair salons, barbers, tattoo shops, nail salons, and other personal service providers may open with limited capacity and by reservation only.

Erin added that on May 20th Commissioner Jan Malcolm spoke to the peak of cases in Minnesota and that she reported that data on the COVID crisis is mixed. Some sources show that we maintained a steady pace and we are on track for the peak in the latter part of July, give or take a few weeks. That data was based on the May 13th modeling.

Last Friday the Commissioner drew attention to the volatile situation that COVID-19 can create. Friday showed a record high of new cases in one day with over 800 new cases, a 60% increase over the previous day's totals, which ended a six day streak of declining numbers. Along with that there was a record number of deaths reported that day of 33 and that the metro area ICU's are nearing 95% capacity.

Erin also noted that none of the counties long term care facilities requested to participate in the full-facility testing that was offered by the state to them at this time, however she believes that we now have a few that would be interested when the time is right for them, perhaps in the coming weeks.

Commissioner Niemi mentioned that he had heard that the State, due to the influx of new patients, was considering using nursing homes to house patients and if Erin was aware of anything like that, to which Erin replied that she had not heard of that but she knew that there were provisional plans in place for alternate care sites. Each region was to determine an alternate care site in the case that bed capacity was met and they may need to move non-critical patients off site.

Financial Assistance COVID-19 Effects, Jessi Goble, Financial Assistance Supervisor

Jessi gave an update on the COVID-19 effects on the Financial Assistance Department within HHS by reviewing a handout that was included in the Commissioners packets prior to the meeting.

Commissioner Westerlund asked if Jessi could find out whether or not they are waiving the fees that a business has to pay to participate in the SNAP program as a retailer and Jessi responded that she would find out that information for the Commissioner and get back to her.

Commissioner Wedel asked about the additional costs incurred to the county as the result of the COVID-19 crisis and the anticipated reimbursements expected to which Jessica Seibert responded that they would discuss that during their next Budget Committee meeting.

Committee Reports

CARE Board Update

Commissioner Westerlund stated they had met and that they went over some financials, updates, and that they had received a Bremer Grant to help keep them going through the crisis.

Lakes and Pines Update

Commissioner Niemi stated that they did meet via conference call. He however wanted to let Commissioner Wedel talk about his call to Lakes and Pines, Bob Benes, people who are having problems paying their rent and that he was informed that there are funds available for people having problems due to COVID-19.

Commissioner Niemi went on to add that in their meeting they had been awarded \$5,000 from the Initiative Foundation for basic needs that are usually requested from them. Calls continue to come in for help paying things such as utility bills or car insurance bills. He also added that they are seeking \$50,000 from the Major League Baseball Healthy Relations Grant to provide an onsite mental health professional at their North Branch office, twice a week, for accessibility by staff or clients.

He ended by mentioning that they had a volunteer tax service that they are able to offer to people at this time also.

Commissioner Wedel added that the Seven County Senior Federation from Mora were going to be coming to the Aitkin City Library and the Shamrock Town Hall to help people do their taxes in the future.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:45 a.m.

Next Meeting – May 26, 2020