

GONGWER Michigan

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Major Shift Coming In DHHS; Advocates Call It Good Move

The Department of Health and Human Services is making a major realignment in its divisions dealing with public health, notifying departmental employees on Friday that it is creating a new bureau of epidemiology and population health and reassigning the current Office of Local Health Services "to ensure that local public health entities are better connected with senior leadership" in the department.

While the department said the change is to "more clearly align programs and better deliver population health services," the department has come under severe criticism, especially for how its divisions handled its reaction to a deadly outbreak of Legionnaire's disease in Genesee County.

Neither DHHS nor the Genesee County Health Department warned the public of the outbreak, and Governor Rick Snyder said he did not learn of the outbreak until this January, more than a year after it began.

Advocates for public health called the move a positive step for helping improve communication and giving public health a stronger voice. But they also said they wanted to see if the move would improve communication on issues with public health concerns and if other agencies would recognize that virtually all policies have a public health component.

The department did not announce the change publicly, but did so in an email announcement sent to departmental employees that Gongwer News Service obtained.

A departmental official confirmed the changes.

The email from Chief Deputy Director Tim Becker to departmental workers said the reorganization was taking place to "ensure effective collaboration between program areas and to strengthen communication throughout the Population Health and Community Services Administration" within the department.

That division is overseen by Susan Moran and handles the department's epidemiology bureau, its laboratories as well as maternal health, public health planning and contacts with the state's 45 local health departments.

The multiple changes announced by the department will take effect on April 18. The biggest change is creation of a new Bureau of Epidemiology and Population Health, which will be comprised of the former bureaus of Disease Control, Prevention and Epidemiology and Family, Maternal and Child Health.

The new bureau will also contain the divisions of Family and Community Health, Communicable Diseases, Lifecourse Epidemiology and Genomics, Environmental Health and Zoonotic Disease and Special Projects.

Mr. Becker said, "This aligns essential program functions and service delivery of environmental health and communicable disease programs."

Also in the reorganization:

The Bureau of Local Health and Administrative Services is being renamed the Bureau of Health and Wellness;

The Division of Immunization and the Division for Women, Infants and Children are being moved to the Bureau of Health and Wellness "to better coordinate prevention efforts"; and The Children's Special Health Care Services Division will be a part of the Medical Services Administration, which oversees the state's Medicaid program, to better align the "program for operational efficiency." And the Office of Local Health Services will be reassigned to the Deputy Director of Population Health and Community Services Administration, under Ms. Moran, "while maintaining a dotted line relationship to the Chief Medical Executive," Eden Wells.

"This elevates the Office of Local Health Services to the MDHHS Executive Office to ensure that local public health entities are better connected with senior leadership at MDHHS," Mr. Becker wrote to employees in the email.

While the department has come under heavy criticism for its handling of the Legionnaire's outbreak in Genesee County - and it has not yet been determined if the outbreak is related to the Flint water crisis - and while Governor Rick Snyder called for an investigation into operations of the department, an official, on background, said the realignment is to better deal with data and surveillance.

That could still mean the change is related to the Flint crisis.

Meghan Swain, executive director of the Michigan Association for Local Public Health, said she could not speculate on what led the department to make the changes, but she called the moves a positive step so long as there is actual improvement in communications and recognitions of public health issues.

Her association has called for an actual department of public health to be restored. Many issues involving public health are spread through different departments and those departments may not immediately recognize public health components, she said.

So an issue dealing with water would first go to the Department of Environmental Quality, she said, but the department might not see the public health issues immediately.

And Marcus Cheatham, president of the association's executive committee and health officer for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, said the split over public health functions meant "no one really knew who was to monitor Flint's water for health issues.

The association has been urging "some restructuring so we had clear leadership" on public health issues, Mr. Cheatham said.