



Association of
Minnesota Counties

FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE PLATFORM 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an untold amount of suffering, economic impact, and devastation across all parts of the nation. Minnesota counties have seen firsthand the pandemic's effects on our main streets, business and non-profit communities, senior and residential care facilities, renters, and those most in need facing homelessness or without access to food. In response, counties have shifted all their focus and efforts in 2020 and 2021 to responding to community needs by adopting new and creative ways to continue to serve residents and clients as well as creating customized relief programs aimed at food, shelter, and rent assistance along with business and non-profit grant programs. From partnering with local colleges to support workforce training programs, to creating unique business assistance programs to provide relief to specific industries impacted by the pandemic (logging, pork producers, restaurants), counties have once again proven their ability to work professionally, creatively, and with an eye towards those most in need in their communities. As counties look to 2022, we know there is more to be done to ensure a safe, speedy, and equitable recovery. We thank you for your partnership and advocacy on behalf of our state and stand ready to collaborate with you to do best for Minnesotans.

Federal Pandemic Response and Relief

Minnesota counties are grateful for Congress' work to pass the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) in March of 2020 and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) of 2021 in March 2021. Since receiving funds, counties have worked diligently to send millions of dollars out in direct assistance to residents through food, rental, housing, business, and non-profit assistance programs as well as strategic and impactful investments in local public health response, broadband, and more. These resources have been critical to Minnesotans suffering from the economic and health impacts of the pandemic and a lifeline to the business and nonprofit communities that are attempting to weather financial disruptions caused by closures and reduced income. As we enter 2022, AMC urges Congress to work expeditiously and in a bipartisan fashion to pass legislation that provides flexibility in how ARPA funds can be invested in communities. Specifically, the bipartisan State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Fiscal Recovery and Disaster Relief Flexibility Act would allow counties increased flexibility in making critical investments in regional infrastructure projects, housing, and other community development-focused projects that can provide long-term economic benefits to residents long after ARPA spending timeframes are completed. ■

AMC urges Congress to act swiftly to pass legislation to allow for increased flexibility in the use of American Rescue Plan funds.

PRIORITIES

Jail Healthcare

Minnesota counties are responsible—and required by federal law—for delivering critical health services to inmates. Incarcerated individuals have diverse and significant health needs, such as chemical use disorders and mental health diagnoses. Individuals with mental health and/or chemical health indicators are more likely to return to jail than those without these indicators. Providing access to federal health benefits to incarcerated individuals would help counties break the cycle of recidivism caused or exacerbated by untreated mental illness and/or substance use disorders, thereby improving public safety.

AMC urges congress to support current legislative efforts to restore Medicaid and other federal benefits for incarcerated individuals 30 days prior to their release from prison or jail. The Medicaid Inmate Exclusion Policy (MIEP) prohibits the use of federal funds and services for medical care provided to inmates of public institutions. This prohibition of federal resources has negatively impacted rehabilitation outcomes and puts a financial strain on local budgets. Allowing incarcerated individuals to receive services prior to their release from jail or prison will expand access to vital mental health and addiction services, thereby decreasing recidivism and improving health outcomes for individuals reentering the community. In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, making sure individuals have uninterrupted health coverage, particularly during the transition period when they are reentering their communities, is essential for keeping them healthy, limiting spread of the virus, and protecting the health of the community overall. ■

AMC supports legislative efforts to restore benefits under the Social Security Act for incarcerated individuals.

AMC supports additional investment in Public Health Emergency Preparedness programming to support ongoing COVID-19 response and response to future emergencies.

AMC supports additional funding for federal workforce development programming, increasing their impact and ensuring workers can participate in and enter the workforce.

AMC asks for continued support of televisit flexibility to allow counties to assist more clients.

AMC supports the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) to assist job seekers while promoting a speedy, sustainable, and equitable economic recovery after the pandemic.

Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP)

Responding to disasters and emergencies—whether health-centric or not—is a core responsibility of Minnesota’s local public health departments. Local public health agencies across the state re-directed their staff to COVID-19 response and have been in full response mode since as early as February 2020. In Minnesota, PHEP funding goes to the state and is passed through to locals. Past proposals to redistribute PHEP funds and a series of funding cuts highlight the vulnerability of federal funding and compromised local public health’s ability to respond to emergency events, such as COVID-19. Although there has been increased investment because of COVID-19, historically, federal funding has been cut drastically (from nearly \$16 million in 2002 to \$9.2 million in 2019) and funding expectations were not realigned to reflect the cuts. AMC supports adequate, sustained funding for local public health emergency planning and response to support COVID-19 response, ongoing training and equipment needs, and aligning grant expectations with funding levels. ■

Responding to the Workforce Shortage Crisis

Similar to states across the country, a worker shortage is having severe impacts on local economies in Minnesota. Recent employment statistics show unemployment numbers in Minnesota are back to pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, job vacancies are at a record high across nearly every industry. There are multiple issues contributing to the current workforce shortage. Minnesota’s labor force participation rate has dropped significantly since the pandemic began, including for older workers. Workers are dropping out of the labor force due to a number of factors including childcare issues, retirement, and fear of COVID-19. Additionally, there is a mismatch in what workers want to do versus what jobs are available and the skills employers need. Now more than ever, we need strong and widely available workforce development programming to provide the education and training needed to bridge the skills gap. Support services are also necessary to ensure jobseekers have the appropriate childcare, financial resources, and tools they need to successfully participate in training programs and enter the workforce. ■

Telemedicine Flexibility

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, local public health and human services agencies started delivering services in new ways, including via telemedicine (both phone and video). This change allowed for increased flexibility, creating opportunities for counties to better meet clients’ needs. For example, one of the federal level requirements for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programming is that visits be conducted in-person. During the COVID-19 pandemic, waivers were put in place at the federal level to allow visits to happen via phone or video. However, this waiver expires 90 days after the end of the federal declaration of emergency. Allowing televisits for WIC has enabled local public health to reach more clients in need, increase efficiency of staff by allowing them to see more clients and spend less time traveling, and has reduced barriers for clients. Although local public health has already begun returning to in-person visits, permanent changes would provide flexibility, efficiencies, and client convenience in how services are delivered. ■

WIOA Reauthorization

A strong federal workforce system is key to our economic recovery after the disastrous effects of COVID-19 on workers, businesses, and local economies. As such, AMC supports the reauthorization of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which was signed into law in 2014. It was up for reauthorization in 2020, but no action was taken. WIOA is designed to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy. AMC joins the Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards (MAWB) in supporting increased funding for WIOA workforce and adult education grants to at least FY 2020 authorized levels as well as restoring career and technical education (CTE) state grant funding to \$1.3 billion. After nearly two decades of disinvestment, the economy needs significant new investment. ■

Broadband and Transportation

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was recently signed into law by President Biden, which delivers much needed federal investments in both transportation and broadband. The bipartisan bill includes \$284 billion for transportation, including a long-term surface transportation reauthorization, increased investments in off-system bridges, and \$100 billion in competitive resources for counties over five years. Additionally, the bill provides \$65 billion for broadband, including \$42.45 billion in grants to states for broadband deployment. AMC supports the work done by NACo to ensure passage of this bill and we will continue to work together with them and our partners at the state level to ensure successful implementation of the funding and programs provided for in the bill. While this funding is pivotal in the success of our infrastructure – roads, bridges, transit, broadband, and beyond – there is much work to do in order to get our transportation system up-to-speed and deliver border-to-border broadband across the state and nation. ■

Child Welfare

AMC supports federal efforts to assist states and counties to make the needed reforms in all areas related to the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). The FFPSA is intended to transform child welfare systems into systems that support children and families in community, reducing the need for out of home placement. Counties seeking to prevent or respond to abuse and neglect and to support families in preventing children from entering foster care have been further challenged by the impacts of COVID-19 in program implementation. As jurisdictions continue to work towards implementation of FFPSA, AMC supports efforts to increase administrative flexibility, bolster the Title IV-E Clearinghouse to increase programming and expand access to culturally relevant and responsive programming and increase funding and supports, including workforce supports, aimed at assisting counties making the transition.

AMC supports efforts to further expand access to child wellbeing support, including prevention services to address the goals of FFPSA while maintaining federal Title IV-E funding for placements as states struggle with meeting requirements of the Adam Walsh background study requirements and Child Abuse and Neglect Registry Checks (CANR) during the pandemic. AMC supports a waiver for Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) to be considered Institutions of Mental Diseases (IMDs), to ensure federally funded health care and treatment are available to eligible children in these placements. ■

Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative

As the headwaters state of the nation's most famous river, Minnesota values its unique position and role as a steward and protector of the Mississippi River natural resources area. The Mississippi River serves not only as an important environmental resource, but also as a critical economic corridor, and a place of recreation and enjoyment for all. As such, AMC and NACo strongly support the Mississippi River Restoration and Resilience Initiative (MRRRI), which will create a new, non-regulatory, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) geographic grant program to provide federal planning and funding supports to enhance river restoration, resilience projects and program activities in the Mississippi River states from the Headwaters to the Delta. AMC believes the passage of the MRRRI will complement ongoing state and local efforts by providing additional federal resources to ensure this vital resource is available for future generations. ■

Preemption

AMC firmly believes in the importance of local control and community-driven decision making. State and national efforts to “preempt” local governments from making critical decisions or policy changes for their constituents are contrary to the principles of federalism and directly impact community sustainability. ■

Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT)/Secure Rural Schools (SRS)

A considerable percentage of land in Minnesota is owned by the federal government, as such, AMC shares the priority of NACo to support restoring the full mandatory funding for the Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) program, which compensates counties for tax-exempt federal land within their boundaries. AMC and NACo also support extending the Secure Rural Schools (SRS) program as a transitional funding mechanism until the federal government fully implements a sustainable long-term forest management program with adequate revenue sharing for forest counties and schools. ■

Public Health Workforce Loan Repayment

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed gaps in Minnesota's public health workforce. Since 2008, local health departments across the United States have lost more than 20% of their workforce—equivalent to more than 50,000 jobs. A significant increase in investment in the public health workforce is needed and should include efforts to establish a public health student loan repayment program. H.R. 3297 would serve eligible individuals who work in a local, state, or tribal public health department for three consecutive years and offer up to \$35,000 in repayment assistance for each year of service. Loan repayment will be key in recruiting a robust new public health workforce in the years to come. ■

Rural Healthcare

Counties play a critical role in providing healthcare services to citizens across the entire state of Minnesota, including those that live in more rural parts of the state. In some rural Minnesota counties, there are very limited options that exist for healthcare plans and a lack of access to care. AMC supports federal efforts to broaden healthcare access and options throughout the entire state of Minnesota. Policy and funding reforms should provide cost containment while enhancing quality care choices and grant the maximum amount of decision-making authority and flexibility as possible to the local level. ■

Support for Individuals & Families

Counties are on the front line in maintaining the safety net for those unable to work and encouraging the achievement of self-sufficiency for those who can. AMC supports increasing federal funding for and alignment among programs that assist those most in need and encourages the maximum amount of efficiency and flexibility possible at the local level. Key federal programs that assist counties in tackling poverty include the Social Services Block Grant, the Community Services Block Grant, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. ■

Waters of the US (WOTUS)

Minnesota counties work diligently to provide for the health, well-being, and safety of our citizens including through water management and protection efforts. Waters of the United States (WOTUS) is once again being reexamined due to court action on the 2020 Navigable Waters Rule and direction from the Administration to update the pre-2015 definitions. AMC urges Congress and the Administration, along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to rewrite this rule in consultation and collaboration with state and local governments. As partners in protecting America's water resources, it is essential that local governments have a clear understanding of any changes to the definition of WOTUS, which will have significant impacts on all aspects of the CWA. ■

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