

Minnesota Counties



A quarterly publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

Retiring County Commissioner Reflections

Elections and retirements always bring bittersweet changes to the county landscape, and this year was no exception. We will be welcoming 69 new commissioners to the county family in 2021, as two incumbents were defeated in the August primary, 25 incumbents were defeated in the General Election, and 40 commissioners did not seek re-election.

We asked four retiring county commissioners from different regions in our state to share their thoughts and reflections on their time in county government and their involvement with the Association of Minnesota Counties.

Harlan Madsen, Kandiyohi County

Years of Service: 26 (plus a total of 45 years on the county planning and zoning board), AMC President in 2005.

Why did you originally decide to run for office?

My parents instilled a sense of community service. My dad served on the township board for 63 years, he didn't retire until he was 84. I believe that government and community is not a spectator sport and I wanted to take the opportunity to look at and do things differently.

What did you find to be the most rewarding part of being a county commissioner?

Working with people and gaining a much broader perspective about people. I also enjoy being a champion and being part of a process that gets things done and creates a better quality of life for people in the county.

What did you find most challenging?

Over the last few years, the creep of more partisan politics into county government has made for much more intense controversies and the discourse is much more personal. It is disappointing to see how we have digressed in that area; we have less opportunities to learn, understand, and grow. The balance of personal and professional time has always been a challenge as well.



What accomplishment as county commissioner are you most proud of?

My commitment to communicate, engage people, and follow through with integrity. My commitment to following through with making decisions in the best public interest that will leave a legacy and better quality of life. I am also proud of not compromising my values and integrity.

What did you find most valuable about your membership/involvement with AMC?

The opportunity to network, to listen and learn from commissioners and staff from other counties and increase perspectives on issues. From that, I was able to develop many long terms relationships.

What would be the one piece of advice that you'd give any current or future county commissioners?

It is important to involve yourself in the process but then commit yourself to the ongoing work. I like to use the example of eggs and bacon for breakfast: the chicken is involved, the pig is committed. You also need to listen, learn and sometimes laugh. Make sure you learn the parts but focus on the whole.

Any other thoughts/reflections?

It has been incredible and humbling. I am grateful for the opportunity my family has given me to be this involved and I am grateful that I got to see the skills, talent, passion and compassion of my peers from around the state.

PROFILES, continued on page 4.

**FALL
2020**

October
November
December

VOLUME 64, ISSUE 4

Meet the AMC Babies of 2020

While 2020 has been a year full of seemingly endless negative developments as we've all navigated the complications of the coronavirus pandemic, civil unrest, a presidential election, and *murder hornets*, AMC wanted to share a bit of a "happy news antidote" in the form of the new additions that four AMC staff members have welcomed to their families this year. Below you will find, in their own words, what the experience of welcoming new lives into the new world of 2020 has been like for them and their families.

Matt Hilgart, AMC Government Relations Manager

My wife Liz and I welcomed our first child, Avi, into this world on September 22. Avner ("Avi" for short) means father of light in Hebrew and he is just that to us during this extremely chaotic year. Mom and baby are doing well as we try to balance working from home while not having the urge to run downstairs after each zoom meeting to pick him up and hold him. Like all families, Liz and I struggle with the inability to see extended family and interact with friends but have had the pleasure of having both sets of parents and my sister visit on multiple occasions. Having a child during COVID has brought so much joy in an otherwise tough year and we've been celebrating all his "firsts" and trying to decipher his personality with each smile, coo, or cry. Thank you for all the well wishes and gestures of kindness as we embark on this new and exciting phase of life!



Matt Hilgart and wife Liz welcomed baby Avi in September.

AMC BABIES, continued on page 8.

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Looking Back on 2020

By Rich Sve, Lake County Commissioner and AMC President

Late last year, I wrote my first column as AMC president, and it was titled, "Looking Forward to 2020." At that time, I stated my preparedness for the presidency of AMC. Well, things took a bit of a turn from what could be considered a normal year.

During the early stages of the pandemic, I spent many hours on the phone speaking to each member of the AMC Board of Directors. These conversations left me with a renewed appreciation for the volume of work counties face and admiration for the passion that all our members have for the safety and growth of their communities.

When I look back on this year and consider all the challenges counties faced due to the pandemic—from the adjustments to county operations, staff relocation, facility closures and virtual meetings, to emergency declarations, the closure of businesses, remote learning for students, limited social interactions, work from home offices, and disruption of our family functions and gatherings—I find it hard to fathom all that has occurred in the past few months.

AMC has faced these same challenges. We took unprecedented steps and closed our building. Staff set up offices at home and began conducting the business of our association remotely in a new way.

The Executive Committee met weekly during April in order to react proactively to the everchanging information surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Decisions to cancel in-person events, meetings, and conferences, were not made lightly nor without debate.

The AMC Board of Directors also convened to conduct the business of the association. It is a pleasure to witness these dedicated women and men debate, modify, and arrive at decisions in the best interest of this organization. An item of much scrutiny and deliberation was the decision to extend the terms of the AMC elected positions by one year. Here again, and due to the uniqueness of this year, we have deviated from the norm, but never out of sight of our organization's best interests.

Many things continue and some new items enhance our programs and organization:

- Braver Angels partnership.
- Dispute resolution training.
- New "transformational" committees on jail populations and the human services system.
- Coffee and Conversation meetings.
- Policy committees and platform development.
- Growing our business partnerships.

Yet, some things will not continue as before, namely our annual conference. This year we will have a virtual annual conference on December 7. I am confident it will be a success, despite the limitations of an online platform.

We formed a Blue Ribbon Committee to evaluate county government operations during the pandemic. The committee shared best practices and recommended appropriate and timely action, such as lobbying the Legislature for waivers and county program assistance. The members of this committee, along with AMC staff and representatives of our affiliate organizations spent many hours developing a White Paper and recommendations to help all counties in this time of so much uncertainty. Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, it was an honor to chair this committee of so many talented and dedicated individuals.

When I think of all the challenges put in front of us this year and all of the innovative responses to those challenges, I am reminded of a famous quote by the anthropologist, Dr. Margaret Mead; "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Our "small group" (AMC) is committed and we do affect change. I am extremely proud to be president when we, commissioners, county staff, AMC staff, and our affiliates, find inventive means to move programs and funding forward at a time when so many things seem to stagnate. Finding opportunities for improvement for the benefit of counties has always been AMC's focus and strong suit. I whole-heartedly believe that it is these times that we find ourselves in - that provides those opportunities.

When I went through the AMC New Commissioners Conference in 2009, one evening we took a bus to AMC Headquarters for a reception. I distinctly remember what AMC Executive Director, Jim Mulder, shared with me during that gathering: "This building is YOUR building, and this association is YOUR association. I hope that YOU will take advantage of them both, because their sole purpose is to aid counties." This is a message we can all take to heart.

As we now look forward to 2021, perhaps we do so without the certainties we have held in past years, but I am confident that this organization will continue to meet the needs of its members.

Allow me to leave you with one more quote, from Dr. Theodore Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss: "Why fit in when you were born to lead."

You are all leaders and I look forward to continuing our work together in the coming year. ■



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Jan Callison, Hennepin County

Years of Service: 12 (preceded by three years as mayor and 12 years as a city council member in Minnetonka)

Why did you originally decide to run for office?

Ever since I was a kid, I was interested in policy making and I had a high interest in what government does. It was always parts of family discussions. When I moved to Minnesota I got involved in board and committees locally as a way to get to know my community and that eventually led to elective office.

What did you find to be the most rewarding part of being a county commissioner?

Problem solving, getting answers, and making sure programs fit for their intended purpose. Also, getting to have a greater understanding of the community and their frame of reference on important issues.

What did you find most challenging?

Today's climate, the division and the ways issues are polarized. It makes it much harder for local governments to stay the course. It is also difficult when personal beliefs diverge from what might be the right place to end up in a policy discussion.

What accomplishment as county commissioner are you most proud of?

Southwest LRT is something I will be associated with for a long time. I worked on it as a city council member in Minnetonka and for 12 years on the board. It took decades to get it done and someday I'll ride on the train and reflect on all the time and energy it took. It sounds kind of dull to talk about process, but I think my background in city government gave me a focus on how government should function and that's been a focus of mine. Good process leads to good decisions.

What did you find most valuable about your membership/involvement with AMC?

The connections and the knowledge of what is going on in other counties, and to see county government from a different perspective. Also, the opportunity it offered to be supportive of each other.

What would be the one piece of advice that you'd give any current or future county commissioners?

Be open to the possibility that you might be wrong. If you go in with that mindset, you will learn, you can serve people better, and it keeps you humble. All of that leads to better decision making.

Any other thoughts/reflections?

Particularly with the divisions that we have, AMC is uniquely positioned to help us understand each other's wants and needs. But if we don't act on that, then we haven't fulfilled the possibility and the mission of AMC.



Tom Warmka, Faribault County

Years of Service: 20

Why did you originally decide to run for office?

From the time I joined the military at age 18, I have wanted to serve my country at the grassroots level. I have been committed to being involved in the community and I want to be at the table.

What did you find to be the most rewarding part of being a county commissioner?

The ability to help people. Whether the issue is with drainage, HHS, the assessor or any other part of the county, I wanted to get involved and help people and I have always been happy to do so.

What did you find most challenging?

Budgeting is always the hardest. Escalated fixed costs and unfunded mandates make balancing spending with keeping the levy low very challenging. When we got in budget times and had to do 0% raises and furloughs, it hurt to touch people's incomes and has made me focus on making sure we manage the budget in a way that protects our people.

What accomplishment as county commissioner are you most proud of?

I don't like to take credit for things, but I am very proud of securing new space for our Veteran's Service Office. The old space was located with human services and offered little privacy for meetings and was a barrier to veterans seeking services. We were able to move Veteran's Services off site, along with Extension and the License Center, to an old doctor's office we renovated. The number of vets getting services has gone way up now that we have a better environment.

What did you find most valuable about your membership/involvement with AMC?

There are so many things, from chairing the Ag Task Force and the General Government Policy Committee, to working with the policy analysts that are always so dang good. Beyond that, networking with high quality commissioners, making contacts with folks across the state, and the opportunity to testify at the Legislature on important issues that AMC advocates for on behalf of counties.

What would be the one piece of advice that you'd give any current or future county commissioners?

Be honest with constituents. Do it for the right reasons, don't worry about the money, and do the best for the people you represent.

Any other thoughts/reflections?

AMC has always had great staff. I'd also like to mention the opportunity to serve on Futures. I was blessed to be part of that, I learned a lot, it adjusted my thinking on a lot of topics, and made me a better person.

PROFILES, continued from page 4.

Heidi Doo-Kirk, Cook County

Years of Service: 8

Why did you originally decide to run for office?

My husband and my predecessor on the board (Commissioner Jim Johnson) gave me strong encouragement to run. My husband and I wagered on the outcome, and I won the election which means I lost the bet!

What did you find to be the most rewarding part of being a county commissioner?

Seeing success addressing housing issues in Cook County. Those issues had been discussed for more than a decade before I joined the board. We worked with the EDA and helped turn that organization around and the partnership resulted in 16 rental units and 12 houses being built, the last of them just being finished with in the last year.

What did you find most challenging?

Making the change to the administrative form of government and hiring an administrator. It was a big change for Cook County and presented many challenges.

What accomplishment as county commissioner are you most proud of?

The adoption of Speak Your Peace (<http://www.dsaspeakyourpeace.org/index.html>), the expansion of our public health department that has generated savings in the long run, and returning the county to a balanced budget. None of those were easy, but all have been worthwhile.

What did you find most valuable about your membership/involvement with AMC?

Everything that is educational and brings the counties together. But most of all, the Tribal Relations Committee. Being from a county with Tribal Nation, it was critical to have the opportunity to learn relevant history and share with other counties.

What would be the one piece of advice that you'd give any current or future county commissioners?

I learned this at County Commissioner 101, carry business cards! You can use those to make sure your constituents can contact you, but also to diffuse angry or tense situations. Offering to follow up later, but with a card that they can contact you and hold you to it helps. Also, your constituents need to be heard. You don't need to agree with them, you just need to listen.

Any other thoughts/reflections?

It is so important to make connections at AMC. There are people from all over, maybe even the far end of the state, that have experiences and advice that can be useful. Tap into that! And the AMC staff are full of information, utilize the staff and resources that AMC offers!



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Together but Apart: MCIT Annual Meeting Goes Virtual



The COVID-19 pandemic has forced MCIT to rethink how to conduct the work of the Trust, specifically the annual membership meeting. This meeting has typically been held in conjunction with the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) conference. This year, AMC is foregoing its traditional format and opting to conduct a virtual meeting. This development required MCIT to change how it holds its 2020 annual membership meeting. After much consideration, the meeting will be held virtually December 11 at 11 a.m.

Meeting Requirements

The MCIT Bylaws require that a meeting of the membership be held on an annual basis. As a public entity, MCIT must comply with Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 13D—The Open Meeting Law (OML).

There are exceptions to the requirements of the OML where a health pandemic risk exists. These exceptions apply to the board needing to have a quorum in person to conduct business and limiting or prohibiting attendance by the public.

In making its decisions regarding the 2020 annual meeting, the MCIT board reviewed Minnesota Statutes, Section 13D.021; the Minnesota Governor's Executive Order 20-75; guidance provided by the Minnesota Department of Administration; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's social distancing requirements.

In a normal year, members would gather to learn about MCIT activities, catch up on news with friends and colleagues and share in refreshments. This year, members are invited to participate in the first virtual meeting of the membership.

Annual Meeting Details

MCIT will hold its 2020 Annual Membership Meeting December 11 at 11 a.m. The MCIT board will gather in person for the meeting and provide members the ability to observe and participate in the meeting remotely.

Agenda items for the meeting include:

- Report on the state of MCIT's finances.
- Board election results.
- Report by the executive director.
- Announcement of 2020 MCIT award winners.

Details about how members can attend MCIT's virtual annual meeting of the membership will be provided closer to the event date. Check MCIT.org and e-mail for announcements.

Board of Directors Election

The MCIT Bylaws require that an election for the board of directors be held during the annual meeting. With this year's virtual annual meeting, the election of at-large board positions will be conducted by a mailed paper ballot. Elections are required when the officer's term on the MCIT Board expires and to ratify mid-term appointments.

This year, three seats are up for election.



Peysar

Based on the November 3, 2020, election, incumbent board member Richard (Dick) Downham, Cass County Commissioner, is no longer eligible to seek re-election to the MCIT Board of Directors. Therefore, this seat is now open to any county commissioner, auditor or auditor-treasurer from a member county to seek election. A letter explaining how to submit a letter of interest was sent to eligible commissioners, auditors and auditor-treasurers November 6, with a deadline to apply of November 17.

Aitkin County Auditor Kirk Peysar has served on the board since his appointment in February 2020 to complete an unexpired term that ends December 31, 2020. Peysar is seeking election to the board for a four-year term that expires December 31, 2024.



Ward

Winona County Commissioner Marcia Ward has served on the board since her appointment in July 2019 to complete an unexpired term. Ward is seeking election to the board for a four-year term that expires December 31, 2024.

All county commissioners and county auditors/auditor-treasurers have been sent notice of the election. Persons interested in being a candidate are required to contact MCIT Deputy Director Steve Nelson and provide a letter of interest by the close of business November 5, 2020.

A nominating committee of the board has been appointed to review the qualifications of candidates. Those selected by the committee will be contacted to schedule a virtual interview in early November.

Candidates selected by the Nominating Committee will have their names placed on the ballot.

Ballots will be mailed to the designated voting delegate in each member county for return by 4:30 p.m. December 10. Only each county's voting delegate or his or her alternate is eligible to vote. Ballots will be counted during the annual meeting at which time the winners will be announced.

Members are encouraged to register for the meeting to learn what issues are affecting MCIT and how the Trust is dealing with the changing landscape of providing services and conducting business in a world affected by COVID-19. ■



Association of Minnesota Counties

Virtual Annual Meeting

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To Our Friends & Partners at the Association of Minnesota Counties,

With 2020 Census enumeration having wrapped-up in October, all of us at the Minnesota State Demographic Center wish to sincerely thank you for assisting us in our pursuit of a complete count in this year's Census.

As many of you know, Minnesota's 2020 Census engagement efforts began all the way back in 2015. Despite those years of preparation, no one could have predicted that a global pandemic would afflict the country in the days leading-up to the Census' roll-out in March. Without assistance from partners like the Association of Minnesota Counties, Minnesota's Census participation might have plummeted, representing a disaster for all those communities who rely on Census-tied programs and funding. Instead, partners across the state were able to act quickly and decisively in their identification of alternative strategies for engaging their communities, thus ensuring that the Census was not forgotten in wake of COVID-19.

In a direct reflection of those efforts, Minnesota finished with the best Census self-response rate in the nation, with 75.1% of Minnesota households having responded to the Census on their own. For context, that is one full percentage point above Minnesota's 2010 Census self-response rate, 2.7% above the second-place state (Washington), and most importantly, 2.9% above third place Wisconsin. Additionally, Minnesota is also home to four of the nation's top ten performing counties in terms of Census self-response rate (Carver #2, Washington #5, Anoka #5, and Scott #8), as well as two of the nation's top ten cities with populations above 300,000 (St. Paul #5, Minneapolis #9).

If you want to explore your community's 2020 Census self-response rate, please visit the U.S. Census Bureau's self-response rate map, showing how various state, counties, cities, and other municipalities fared in relation to each other. Likewise, this 2020 Census Hard to Count Map shows how the various states and counties across the nation performed in relation to their 2010 response rates.

We want to acknowledge all the hard work that you have put in to get us here. We are profoundly grateful for all the time, energy, and effort you put into the Census during a pandemic year. As our state and communities look to recover from the pandemic and its aftermath, we look forward to working with you to use this data to help our friends and neighbors return to prosperity.

Sincerely,
Minnesota State Demographic Center's 2020 Census Team ■



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Jill Suurmeyer, AMC Research Analyst

My husband Isaac and I welcomed our first child, Violet, on March 8, two days after the first confirmed COVID case in Minnesota. We had the typical hospital experience but spent a lot of time discussing COVID and its uncertainties with the medical team. The first couple months of Violet's life were quite stressful for my husband and me. My husband is a physician at Hennepin Healthcare and he volunteered to work in the COVID screening clinic. Since he is regularly exposed to COVID, we had to restrict visitors to our home in case we were unknowingly COVID positive. It was hard not to be able to share Violet with our family and friends.

I feel fortunate that even with my husband's work and Violet's time in daycare, my family has remained healthy. We have taken Violet on many outdoor adventures like hikes and bike rides that we may not have done if it weren't for the pandemic. She loves being outside and enjoyed her first experience with snow when we converted her bike trailer into a sleigh and rode around the neighborhood after the first snowfall of the year. We look forward to bundling her up and taking her cross-country skiing and snowshoeing this winter.



Jill Suurmeyer and husband Isaac Weeks welcomed baby Violet in March.

Jeanna Fortney, AMC Housing, Economic Development, and Workforce Policy Analyst and Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards (MAWB) Director



Jeanna Fortney, husband Alonzo and big sister Mariah, welcomed twins Myles and Theo in July.

In December we found out we were expecting, and in January we learned it was twins. We were very shocked and it took several months to get used to the fact we would be adding two babies to our family, in addition to our three-year-old daughter. When the pandemic worsened during the winter, my husband Alonzo was no longer allowed to attend doctor's appointments with me which was tough. Being pregnant with twins was already stressful and there were a lot of unknowns about if pregnant women were more susceptible to contracting the virus.

I delivered our twin boys, Myles Alonzo and Theo Lewis, on July 20, about 6 weeks early. The boys spent 8 days in the NICU but were overall healthy! The most challenging part about giving birth during the pandemic was not having family allowed to visit us during our hospital stay or the boys' stay at the NICU at Children's Hospital in Minneapolis. Our daughter didn't get to meet her brothers until they came home and I was going back and forth all day from home to the hospital so I could spend time with her and the babies. Also challenging is only a few family members and close friends have been able to meet the boys (and help mom and dad adjust!) since we are trying to keep our circle small. It seems many important people in our lives won't be able to meet them in-person for some time, but FaceTime has been helpful with that!

On the bright side, we have a lot of family time at home with the five of us. I'd like to thank Julie Ring and all of AMC for their support both during my pregnancy, maternity leave, and transition back to work.

Matt Freeman, Minnesota Association of County Social Services Administrators (MACSSA) Executive Director

My wife, Nicole, and I welcomed our first child, Leonard or "Leo", on February 19. With my wife as an elections coordinator, we had not sought to have our first child as Minnesota prepared for its first Presidential primary, or during the busy time of legislative session, but after a miscarriage the previous year we were elated to have a happy and healthy baby. We were lucky that Leo arrived just prior to COVID-19 impacting Minnesota, so we were able to have a typical hospital experience, with friends and family visiting us at the hospital and in the first couple weeks at home.

However, soon we had to restrict visitors to our home and it has been sad to not be able to share these early snuggly times with our loved ones. My mother has been able to remain a part of our strict quarantine bubble, however, we have struggled with fear of exposure for Nicole's mom, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in December and immune compromised due to chemotherapy. We continue to utilize a lot of FaceTime visits and socially-distanced outdoor introductions on our porch, our patio, or through our glass front door.

Returning to work in a virtual environment was challenging, as the February meeting was the last in-person MACSSA meeting of 2020. However, a perk has been being able to share live updates on Leo's growth and development with MACSSA members via Zoom. Getting to see Baby Leo was also a successful bribe to get my members to log into meetings on time in the early months.

Upon Nicole returning to work full-time in May, Leo began attending a daycare center. Despite their institutional precautions, in August Leo was exposed to a COVID-19 positive staff member and contracted and transmitted COVID-19 to his parents. Thankfully, Leo has not exhibited any symptoms and does not seem impacted; Nicole and I recovered within two weeks from worrisome, but not debilitating, COVID symptoms.

Leo loves singing, dancing, and flirting and is diligently working on his "cruising", walking, and eating of solid food. His favorite activities are clapping, putting books in his mouth, watching leaves fall out the window, and smashing crinkly items. Despite contributing to our sleep deprivation, he has been our source of joy during the challenges of COVID-19. ■



Matt Freeman and his wife Nicole welcomed baby Leo in February. Photo Credit- Joe and Jen Photo 2020 - joeandjenphoto.com

To Norway in 2014, Now a Fulbright Scholar Alumni Ambassador

By Heather Bandeen, AMC Research and Program Development Manager

In 2014, I received a U.S. Fulbright Scholar Grant to the country of Norway. When I arrived and walked up to passport control, the official yelled exuberantly, "You're from Minnesota? From one Scandinavian country to another, welcome!"

The chance to be in Norway changed my life. Because of Fulbright, I spent an entire year traveling by train, bus, airplane, and ferry boat to every region of this beautiful country. I met hundreds of teachers and thousands of students while teaching in high schools, prisons, and colleges across new communities each week.

One of my favorite memories includes my time in Svalbard where I taught at Longyearbyen School. As you may know, Svalbard is located midway between continental Norway and the North Pole. It is home to the Global Seed Vault. While here, I experienced 24-hour darkness and went dogsledding under the Northern Lights. I learned that my hotel had been relocated from the Olympic Village in Lillehammer and continues to serve as the northernmost full-service hotel in the world.

This fall, I was selected as a Fulbright Scholar Alumni Ambassador. In 2020-21, I will represent the program externally while also serving in an advisory capacity to the U.S. Department of State and the Institute of International Education.

If you have ever thought of applying for a Fulbright grant, I would be honored to talk with you anytime. For more information, please visit: <https://www.cies.org>. The 2021-2022 competition is now open.

The Fulbright Program was established in 1946, under legislation introduced by then-Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas. It is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and serves as the flagship international exchange program, supported by the people of the United States and partner countries around the world. ■



Heather with high school students in Norway.



Trains near Heather's apartment in Oslo, Norway.



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County Employees are Doing Well in the Work From Home Movement

By Michael Williams, PhD, Stearns County Administrator, MACA Secretary

COVID-19 has forced counties to take steps to protect our employees and the public from contracting and spreading the disease. The most prominent measure to protect our employees and the public was to have employees work from home (WFH). Counties were, and are, not alone in the WFH movement. In March, a survey of 158 U.S. companies representing 1.5 million employees showed that nearly 50% of the businesses were implementing remote work. Even today, many county employees continue to WFH at least for a portion of the work week. In Stearns County for example, 71% of employees are working from home or working from home some of the time.

Even though the pandemic persists, the private sector and government are beginning to consider and question the return-to-work situation. The looming questions for many might be, if we do return to the office, when and how? But, a more important question might be why would we do that?

Many experts agree that the shift to work from home will continue when the pandemic subsides. It is estimated that 50% of the U.S. workforce holds a job that is compatible with working remotely. Global Workplace Analysis predicts that 25% – 30% of the workforce will be working at home several days a week by the end of 2021. We shouldn't wonder why, because the pandemic has only emphasized what employees have wanted for quite some time – the flexibility that WFH can provide. In addition, our supervisors have learned that people can be as productive or more productive when working from home. Conversely, it is being found that employees with performance issues while working at home are likely to be the same employees with performance issues in the traditional work setting.

An employee working from home does not need to commute, might have less interruptions, does not need to dress for business, and can stay closer to family. On the other hand, the WFH employees might feel isolated and disconnected, might have distractions at home, might not have adequate space and equipment to work from home, and does not have the direct supervision provided in the traditional workplace.

Stearns County, like other counties, wanted to know how our employees were feeling about the WFH change – so we asked! The results shared below come from employee surveys conducted by four counties accumulating 2,183 responses. The response rate from employees that are working at home is estimated to be 60% to over 70%. The counties did not ask the same questions, but there were some questions that were similar in all four counties and other questions that were similar in two or three counties. Thus, the similarities between the responses are revealing and, I believe, pertinent to all Minnesota counties.

A common survey question sought to ascertain how productive the employee felt while working at home. Between 53% and 84% of employees report more productivity at home than at the office. If we add-in those that reported they are equally productive at home, the percentage increases to between 80% and 95%!

A second common question asked was how the employee feels about working at home or how satisfied the employee is with WFH. Employees are satisfied or very satisfied with the WFH arrangement at rates of 70%, 71%, 77% and 85%! If we consider those that feel neutral about WFH, less than 10% of surveyed employees have negative feelings about WFH.

Three of the counties asked employees if they had the proper tools and technology to successfully WFH. Again, between 80% and 88% agreed that they had what they needed to do the job. As we know, counties did a good job of equipping employees with cell phones, soft phones (VoIP), and laptops.

By and large, employees are reporting satisfaction with WFH. However, many employees haven't been in the WFH situation for very long; might it just be a welcome change of pace? To continue with these initially reported successes and savings, changes will need to be made sustainable. When asked what was challenging about WFH, employees reported ergonomics, communications with co-workers, and social isolation. One county asked its employees what equipment was still needed. The two most reported needs were a printer and a second monitor.

Providing the equipment to work is easy – get monitors and printers – especially now with CARES Act dollars available. Ergonomics is a different challenge. Not everyone has proper chairs, desks, lighting and the space to be comfortable working at home. Counties can do an analysis of an employee's home-work station (even via teleconference), but employees might want the county to pay for needed improvements. Perhaps an annual stipend for employees to improve WIFI and purchase chairs, desks, or lighting is something to consider? Especially since, as I believe, we should not deem WFH an employee privilege; WFH should be a new strategy to boost effectiveness, efficiency, and cost savings for the county in addition to being considered a benefit and incentive to the employee.

Social isolation and lack of communications remains of great concern to both employer and employee which is why we will continue to see hybrid WFH/WFO positions. Many counties have created a culture and atmosphere that, in part, depends upon people being together. Fortunately, communications can be improved with the use of technology: Choose video for anything that might take more than a few minutes; plan virtual social events and coffee breaks, and set periodic check-ins and team meetings. A county's WFH policy might want to require employees to be online at certain times and establish criteria for which meetings should be held in person and which meetings can be held remotely.

Will such efforts substitute for face-to-face interactions? Perhaps only more time and amassed experience with WFH will tell. There is much to think about when creating a WFH policy to preserve and enhance a positive work culture. However, if this COVID-19 experience has shown us anything about WFH, it may very well be worth the time and effort. ■



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Grants Propel Grass Lake Restoration

By Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Staff

The Kandiyohi County-led multi-partner, multi-benefit project is in its final phase. Among anticipated benefits: water quality improvements in downstream lakes, Willmar flood relief, improved agricultural drainage and shoreline erosion control.

The final piece of a \$5.5 million shallow lake restoration 30 years in the making is under construction this fall in Kandiyohi County. Once the main water control structure is built and the 850-acre basin fills, Grass Lake will once again filter and retain water.

The multi-benefit project has garnered support from local landowners and conservation organizations, the city of Willmar, Kandiyohi County, Kandiyohi Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD), and federal agencies including the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

"We're hoping to see water quality improvements downstream, far less shoreline erosion on the lakes and rivers downstream, and then some floodwater relief," said Loren Engelby, Kandiyohi County public drainage manager. By retaining water, Grass Lake also will improve agricultural drainage systems' efficiency.

A \$250,000 Clean Water Fund grant from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), and a \$400,000 Conservation Project Legacy grant from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) made building the water control structure possible.

"That is what we needed to do the final phase," Engelby said. He was appointed project coordinator for the county, but his 27-year involvement started when he was Kandiyohi SWCD's RIM program manager.

Built in 1906 to expand agricultural production, Kandiyohi County Ditch 23 ran through the middle of Grass Lake. More of the lake was drained in 1955. Over time, changing agricultural practices and city stormwater pushed more water through the system, contributing to flooding in southeast Willmar, downstream erosion and downstream lakes' water-quality impairments. Increasingly heavy rains made farming within the 1,200-acre basin more difficult.

The first landowner enrolled the first Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement within the basin in 1988. Others followed suit. Eventually, Kandiyohi County and BWSR agreed it was best to pursue a lakebed restoration instead of a piecemeal restoration.

"From the city of Willmar and the local residents (to) the agricultural community and the lakes, rivers and streams downstream — they're all going to experience, at some level, some relief and some benefit," Engelby said.

Southeast Willmar was prone to flooding during the spring melt and after heavy rains. Grass Lake and its surrounding wetlands — visible from the Minnesota Highway 23/71 bypass — feed the South Fork Crow River, which flows into the Mississippi River, and a series of shallow lakes popular among anglers and waterfowl hunters. "There'll be less sediment going downstream, so there's a great water quality component," Engelby said. "Fisheries and the waterfowl habitat (are) going to be improved. The lakebed itself will create phenomenal wildlife habitat. Then the water quality component — just by storing and treating those 9,500 acres of watershed coming into it, should be just incredible."

The project restores 850 acres of the 1,200-acre basin. Kandiyohi County will maintain the level of the restored lake and manage the vegetation.

Twenty-five conservation easements — 22 of them perpetual RIM easements, two of them 30-year easements through NRCS' Federal Wetlands Reserve Program, one a Kandiyohi County perpetual easement — protect the entire 1,500-acre project area, which encompasses seasonal wetlands and upland habitat.

From Grass Lake, water flows to Lake Wakanda. A 1,750-acre shallow lake a few miles south of Willmar, Wakanda is among the lakes negatively affected by excess nutrients, municipal wastewater and untreated runoff. A popular fishery and designated waterfowl resting area, Lake Wakanda was a staging area for thousands of waterfowl decades ago.

"We're definitely looking for flooding reductions downstream to help impact that chain of lakes," said Ryan Peterson, the Kandiyohi SWCD RIM coordinator who works directly with landowners.

Grass Lake is also the headwaters of the South Fork Crow River. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) in 2008 listed Lake Wakanda as impaired for aquatic recreation due to excess nutrients. Severe algae blooms have been a problem. The South Fork Crow River is impaired due to turbidity and excess nutrients.



Clouds reflect on the partially restored north end of Grass Lake. Once the \$5.5 million restoration is complete, Grass Lake will resemble a cattail marsh. Watershed modeling and previous data collection project the Grass Lake restoration will reduce sediment-loading from a 13-square-mile drainage area to downstream waters by more than 90%. It's expected to reduce phosphorus by nearly 60%. Photo Credit: Kandiyohi SWCD

Based on watershed modeling and previous data collection, the Grass Lake restoration is expected to reduce sediment-loading from a 13-square-mile drainage area to downstream waters by more than 90%. It's expected to reduce phosphorus — which feeds the algae that can turn lakes green — by nearly 60%.

"It's really been looked at as the silver bullet," Peterson said of the Grass Lake restoration, which will resemble a cattail marsh when work is complete.

"We've also restored a lot of upland habitat around the perimeter that should help pollinators and ground-nesting species," Peterson said.

The project has progressed bit by bit over the years as funds became available. Engelby said keeping everyone informed was the key to success.

"We have 15 or 16 private landowners and their families, we have the county board of commissioners, we have the county drainage authority, we have the city of Willmar, we have a multitude of conservation groups — DNR, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Minnesota Waterfowl have all been very significant partners," Engelby said of additional partners involved over the years. "What's unique is being able to pull all those partners together to reach a common goal."

Work is expected to finish by next spring.

"If we can afford to, we'd like to put in some water-quality monitoring stations so we can actually see what that big lakebed wetland is treating and what nutrients it's taking out," Engelby said.

By the Numbers

- RESTORATION ELEMENTS:** 1,040 acres of a shallow prairie wetland, nearly 500 acres' upland habitat, islands ranging in size from a few acres to 30 acres (including prairie and native oak savanna).
- CURRENT PARTNERS:** Kandiyohi County and Kandiyohi SWCD's partners include the UDSA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, BWSR, DNR, MPCA, the city of Willmar, Ducks Unlimited and the Wakanda Lake Association.
- COSTS:** About \$2.5 million for easements acquisition; about \$3 million for vegetation, restoration.
- BWSR GRANTS:** \$250,000 Clean Water Fund grant for riparian easements and restoration awarded in 2020 (Kandiyohi County is providing a 10% in-kind match); \$1.4 million awarded in 2016 for project activities including construction and consulting services contracts (funds came from a 2011 capital budget appropriation).
- DOWNSTREAM WATERS WITHIN GRASS LAKE WATERSHED:** Lakes Wakanda, Eleanor, Little Kandiyohi, Big Kandiyohi, Lillian; South Fork Crow River.

Managing a Remote Workforce

By Melanie Ault, DDA Human Resources, Inc.



Up your performance management game! The landscape has changed, and counties had better get on board. While you work to retain your good employees, realize that you will also be competing for employees with companies that offer remote work. Working from home is likely to stay as associated efficiencies and benefits are recognized, both by employees who thrive with remote work (retain them!) and the employer with reduced infrastructure costs and increased flexibility.

This year's sudden change for supervisors may have come without training on how to manage a remote workforce. Make an investment now to adopt methods supporting ongoing successful management of remote teams. Consider new methods for team motivation and connecting on a regular basis, even when not seeing each other in-person. While many staff find their productivity is actually higher without typical workplace distractions, there will always be instances where a team member needs additional coaching, regardless of whether working onsite or remotely.

Supervisors can effectively manage remote workers' performance by monitoring results, work product, outcomes, and deliverables, instead of observing the employee at their desk.

Prioritize Communication

- When team members are separated, look to connect in other ways and continue a good communication flow.
- Schedule regular, virtual, team meetings so that colleagues can connect face to face, sharing their progress for the week. Seeing each other's expressions while discussing work, and just seeing each other's smiles can go a long way toward enhancing communication.
- Use screen sharing in virtual platforms for easy viewing.
- Reach out by phone, email, and/or a county-approved instant messaging option during their scheduled work hours and be sure to connect on a regular basis for some conversation.
- Take the time to ask questions about how things are going, then listen. How can you incorporate the feedback?
- Train staff to become comfortable with video conferencing.
- Prompt team members to connect with colleagues regularly.

Monitor for Results

Devising ways to monitor staff progress and accomplishments also aligns with best practices for performance management – whether remote or in the office.

- Consider the nature of the work, and identify measurable work products, outcomes, and deliverables.
- Track and measure employees' work, such as the employee creating a project outline identifying tasks and milestones, to agreeing upon steps and deadlines and track progress. Regularly monitor progress and assist with problem solving.
- Use your systems that offer reporting and methods to monitor stats on work quantity and quality. Or, address them during a regular update such as a monthly phone or video conference (take notes), a progress report email, or logging cases or contacts in a spreadsheet.

Set Clear Expectations

In this pandemic, many staff have a new work setting and new supervisory interactions. Assist employees in a successful transition and maintaining productive work routines, with solid accountability. Clearly communicate expectations and procedures that support employees' success.

- Agree and be clear about scheduled work hours and responsiveness.
- Define how to request, and receive approval for days off or schedule adjustments.
- Discuss and establish appropriate remote work locations. (See the Knowledge Base section on Telework.)
- Discuss modified expectations for reporting on or documenting work progress and accomplishments.
- Identify, discuss, and implement methods for monitoring and evaluating performance.
- Prompt team members to update their daily work routines.
- Be open to reasonable ideas that keep staff productive and meeting work requirements, while meeting extra challenges at home.
- Remind employees of your employee assistance program and leave entitlements. These benefits support employees in long-term success and continued quality service to the community.

Treat Your Team Well and Keep Team Members Engaged

These are trying times with an extra array of personal stressors. Maintaining effective service delivery is more likely by devising strategies to effectively support the skilled employees dedicated to delivering public services to the community.

- As employees share their own challenges and needs, be responsive and provide a supportive work environment to the extent possible.
- Support and expect staff to disconnect from work. Just because working from home is at their fingertips does not mean they are all on-call, 24/7.
- Encourage some time off and to enjoy the good in this time.
- Recognize and thank employees for their hard work.
- Incorporate some appropriate humor and hopefully a few laughs into the day.
- Be kind. People are dealing with a lot right now.
- Build in practices and routines that support successful remote work for the long haul.

By embracing this opportunity for working remotely, the county will be adept, versatile, and best positioned with investment up front to successfully manage remote work and public service delivery. ■

More materials on Teleworking and Managing Remote Workforces are available in our Knowledge Base at www.amcddahrsupport.com.

2020 Election Recap



By Deborah Erickson, Crow Wing County Administrative Services Director

Minnesota voters turned out in near record numbers across the state for the November 3, 2020 election. Preliminary numbers following election day showed over 3.2 million voters cast a ballot out of the 4.1 million eligible voters in the state for at least a 78% statewide turnout. Many counties saw record number of voters and, more impactfully to the counties, record numbers of absentee or mail ballots.

With many voters choosing to vote from home or early in person, many counties needed to increase resources of staff and materials to manage the volume of absentee ballots. Along with the volume increase, numerous changes due to COVID-19 and court decrees resulted in many process changes and requirements. As many smaller cities and townships across the state moved to mail balloting for the first time in response to the pandemic, counties also spent monetary and human resources to help provide voter education and understanding of the process changes.

While Minnesota law requires absentee and mail ballots to be received by election day to be counted, several lawsuits were filed noting concerns with pandemic restrictions and mail service delivery times. As a result, a consent decree waived the requirement for a witness for registered voters and extended the deadline for receiving ballots through the mail two days after the primary, and seven days after the general election provided the ballots were postmarked by election day. One of the biggest challenges came just days before the election when a decision from the 8th circuit court required counties to segregate any ballots received after election day to allow for the votes for the offices of President/Vice-President to be identified in case a future court decision invalidates those results. Counties worked through processes to determine how to administer these new requirements.

As with any closely contested election, a vast amount of misinformation is being shared out through multiple channels following election day. As we've noted before, each state has different laws as it pertains to elections. As voters are now absorbing the news of the ongoing presidential count in other states, it creates a sense of anxiety and questions among the voters of Minnesota as well. Commissioners may have gotten questions from constituents on what they are seeing and hearing in the national news; and hopefully your elections administrators are providing you with the necessary information to answer those questions.

As this article is being written, counties are still finalizing the results from the election and preparing for the canvass board meetings, any potential recounts that may need to occur, and the Post-Election Review which is a hand count of some of the offices on the ballots of at least two precincts in each county to determine that the machines counted the ballots as they were supposed to – regardless of what type of pen was used.

As election officials, we want to thank you all for your support during this unprecedented election year which saw us administer three statewide elections during a pandemic with record voter turnout in each of those elections. ■

Extension Ready for 2021


UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
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By Bev Durgan
Dean, University of Minnesota
Extension



As we begin to turn the page on 2020, University of Minnesota Extension is looking ahead to renewing and continuing its partnerships with Minnesota counties and county leaders.

Many of you are longtime collaborators and stakeholders with Extension; others are in new roles and starting to learn about how our organizations work together.

As you know, these last few months have been a challenge. Extension employees in county offices and beyond have found innovative ways to successfully do their work, even at a distance, and I am proud of them for their creativity and perseverance. While it is impossible to predict what will happen in the new year, Extension will continue to follow state and University public health guidelines that are designed to keep employees and the public safe.

Even in the midst of this public health and economic crisis, Extension is making plans to better serve our county stakeholders. In early 2021, we will introduce a redesigned set of web pages that showcase Extension's presence in your counties. In addition, the committee developing a new standard Memorandum of Agreement between counties and Extension for the next three years is getting under way and I am confident they will develop an agreement that works for all parties.

Welcome to those of you who are in new roles, and thank you to all of you who continue to support Extension and 4-H. I look forward to the time when we can gather again in person. In the meantime, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. ■

SSTS Rule Change Process Nearly Complete

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (MPCA) rulemaking project to amend SSTS rules is substantially complete. All administrative procedure requirements have been completed and the rule changes are ready to be put into place.

The rule changes will amend subsurface sewage treatment system (SSTS)-related rules regarding situations where:

A state disposal system (SDS) permit is required rather than a local permit. Under existing rules, a facility can measure its actual wastewater flows or use "table values" — values stated in rule for various types and sizes of facilities — to design a new SSTS. But in situations where measurements show a flow less than the 10,000-gallon-per-day (gpd) permit threshold, but table values indicate a flow greater than 10,000 gpd, an SDS permit is required rather than a local permit. The MPCA is considering rule revisions to allow an existing facility to use measured values to determine permit requirements. The revisions would also include a few other modifications that capture actual wastewater flows into the environment more accurately.

Tank pumping is required for completing a compliance inspection on an existing SSTS. The MPCA is also considering rule changes to require that a septic tank be pumped empty before an official inspection to determine its integrity. The revisions under consideration will require the tank to be inspected through a maintenance hole while empty, with the following exceptions:

1. If an inspector already knows a particular septic tank will not pass inspection for any reason, pumping the tank won't be required. However, a tank can only pass inspection if it was inspected while empty.
2. A tank integrity inspection report shows the tank has passed inspection (with the tank empty) within the past three years.

The MPCA originally planned to finalize this rule earlier in 2020, but after COVID-19-related delays pushed the work back, we are now in the busy season for SSTS inspections, when making these changes effective by publishing a Notice of Adoption could make compliance for the SSTS industry unnecessarily confusing. Therefore, the MPCA will wait until December 2020 to publish the Notice of Adoption. The agency will send a bulletin to the GovDelivery list when the Notice of Adoption is published to make sure all interested parties are aware when the rule does take effect. This will allow for professionals to learn about the changes and plan for a more seamless transition into the 2021 construction season. The agency is currently drafting information on how the changes will impact the industry and guidance on the changes. ■

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Dakota County Public Health Delivers Essential Services to Families in Need During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

Local health departments have many responsibilities laid out in Minnesota statute, one of those responsibilities is responding to infectious diseases, and providing essential services is part of that. As a result, local public health has stepped in to play a leading role in protecting the health of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To help prevent the virus from spreading, residents are asked to stay at home when they are infectious or have exposure to an infected person. This is called isolation or quarantine. Public health has a legal and ethical duty to assure that essential needs are addressed for individuals who are in isolation and quarantine.

"We provide essential services to residents in isolation or quarantine so they can successfully stay home and help prevent the spread of the disease," said Amy Mimm, Dakota County Public Health Supervisor who is overseeing essential services for the county.

In Dakota County, essential services include delivery of food or cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, and prescription medication. It also includes transportation to medical appointments, laundry services, connection to other resources, and help locating alternate housing for those who are unhoused or cannot stay in their own homes.

Addressing these needs follows the Minnesota Statute that states "The needs of persons isolated and quarantined shall be addressed in a systematic and competent fashion, including, but not limited to, providing adequate food, clothing, shelter, means of communication between those in isolation or quarantine and those outside these settings, medication, and competent medical care".

"COVID-19 has really helped illustrate what we take for granted," said Bonnie Brueshoff, Dakota County Public Health Director. "A quick trip to the store, doing a load of laundry; these simple things can become impossible when you are sick and have to be isolated in your home due to COVID-19."

Dakota County Public Health re-directed staff to fill the many COVID-19-related response needs, including delivery of essential services. Dakota County Public Health has more than 20 staff working part- or full-time to deliver essential services to members of their communities in need. "Everyone has their regular job and then their COVID-19 job," said Mimm. "This has become the new normal."

"Our Public Health department has always been community-first," added Brueshoff. "I am very proud of all the ways our essential services team members have stepped up to find new and creative ways to assist those in need."

One goal of public health is to identify all individuals in the county who need essential services supports. "Most of our referrals come through the contact tracing process," explained Mimm.

"Other referrals come from community partners" she said. "Everyone in the response, whether internal in Dakota County or external, has been responsive and nimble."

"Dakota County also operates a COVID-19 Hotline, so when residents call that line asking for information on community resources, the Hotline Operator will assess if the resident is currently in isolation or quarantine and will then make a referral to essential services," said Mimm.

A case investigator inquires with those who have positive cases or contact with an infected person to see if they have everything they need to remain home. If they do not, an assessment is conducted to learn about their specific needs and if support networks are available to help. If they can't meet their needs through other means, local public health will intervene.

Delivery of essential services requires strong partnerships with community members. "At first, we were working with our food shelves to supply food to people and we had a nice partnership with them," explained Mimm. Dakota County Public Health reevaluated the process to improve efficiency and as a result began using services such as InstaCart versus food shelves which are experiencing increased demand.

"We worked with a dietician in the [Woman, Infants, and Children] program to help us study what kind of food and how much was needed over a four-day period," Mimm said. A food package was identified that is nutritional, easy to shop for, culturally sensitive, and could be delivered directly to families in Dakota County.

Providing access to laundry services is also important. Mimm explained that this helps keep people in hotels or multi-unit housing from using shared facilities while infectious. They worked to quickly establish a relationship with an outside agency to deliver this service.

"Public health departments are only as strong and effective as the partners they work with," stated Brueshoff. "Fortunately, we've spent years – decades even – growing and fostering relationships with community groups that do outstanding work. I can't say enough about how vital they've been to our efforts during this pandemic."

Another key service of local public health is delivering prescription medications to those in need. While in quarantine, residents may not have a regular pharmacy or the ability to pick up prescriptions. "We are working with families that don't have health insurance or connection to a primary doctor," said Mimm.

Community Health Workers in the county have also been critical for delivery of essential services. "{Community Health Workers} are still delivering personal protective equipment, masks, gloves, or cleaning supplies," explained Mimm.

"We truly want to provide these essentials to any residents experiencing isolation or quarantine – we know it can already be a stressful experience, and we are grateful that they are doing the important work to help prevent further spread." ■



Dakota County Public Health team members Vera Nelson (left) and Joyce Panasuk (right) prepare packages of essential goods for community members affected by COVID-19.

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