

Minnesota Counties

A quarterly publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

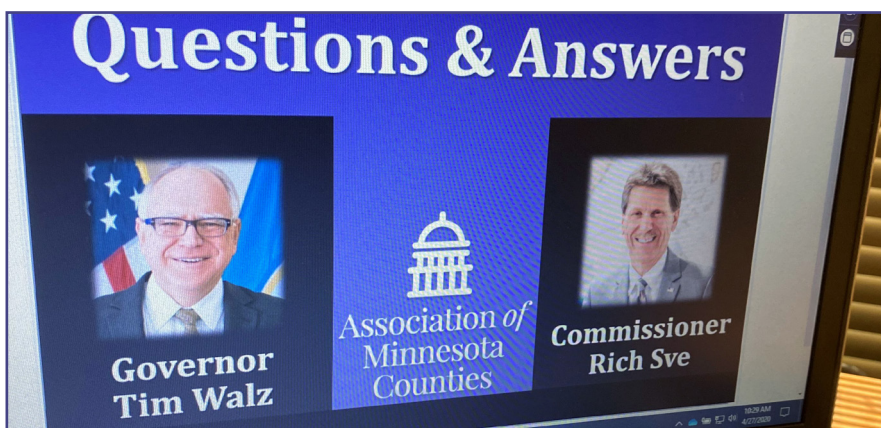
Meeting Today's Challenges Through Innovation, Flexibility, and Dedication

By Ryan Erdmann, AMC Member Engagement Coordinator

While the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic are great and are touching every corner of our lives, it's also important to take a moment to reflect on the positive aspects of how we've all adapted to meet the challenges of what will likely be the public health crisis of our lifetimes.

These are trying times for all Minnesotans, and county government is not immune to the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, counties - from commissioners, to other elected officials, to staff at every level of the organization - are on the front lines and it is a credit to your hard work and dedication that Minnesota is weathering this as well as we are. As Minnesota's 87 counties have risen to this unprecedented occasion by employing a variety of innovative ways to continue essential operations in order to serve citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) has also found new ways to fulfill our mission of assisting counties in the provision of effective county governance for the people of Minnesota.

AMC is unwavering in our commitment to helping all 87 counties in whatever way we can. While we may not be in the AMC offices, or visiting you in your county, or appearing in person in the halls of the Capitol, we are all working hard for you.



AMC members asked Gov. Tim Walz questions during a virtual townhall on April 27.

The following are a few examples of how AMC has adapted our work and where we are focusing our efforts in order to support counties in times of a pandemic:

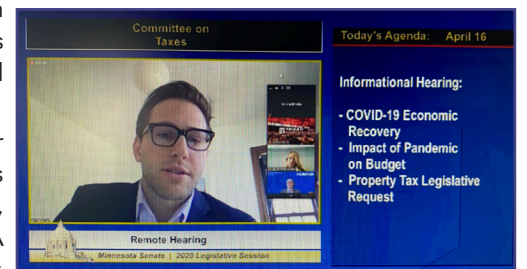
- Providing daily updates to bring together the latest county, state, and federal updates in one place so our members have the most relevant information in a timely manner.
- We have expanded and created processes for daily communication with the Governor's Office, state agencies, and colleagues across the nation.
- Continuing to help members troubleshoot local problems and learn from their colleagues through surveys of broader membership and other research efforts.
- Developing helpful guidelines for members on an array of issues including: remote meetings, property tax relief authority, FLMA leave policies, and planning for reopening and return to work for staff that have been working remotely.
- Creating webinars for AMC members plus virtual policy committee meetings for critical agency and department updates and continued member interaction.
- Continuous monitoring of activity at the Capitol, including organizing virtual testimony and lobbying for legislation that allows flexibility for counties during this time and advocating for monetary relief of COVID-related costs.
- Organizing virtual district meetings to keep regional connections and information-sharing strong in these difficult times.
- Weekly meetings of the AMC Executive Committee and scheduling a virtual Board of Directors meeting to keep association business on track.
- Continued support for AMC affiliates through virtual meeting tools and ongoing updates.

Like everyone in this state and nation has been called to do, AMC has found a variety of new ways of doing business that we never anticipated. As we work through this together, we hope you have found all of these efforts to be helpful. If there are other things that we can do to support you, your staff and the citizens of your counties, please do not hesitate to reach out to AMC staff. We may be spread out all over, but we are still on-call and ready to help. ■

SPRING 2020

April
May
June

VOLUME 64, ISSUE 2



AMC Government Relations Manager Matt Hilgart testifies virtually before the Tax Committee.

Bridging Divides During the COVID-19 Crisis

We have a cultural narrative that crisis brings us together. It would be a nice silver lining, especially in a time when our country and world is so divided. There have been food drives, teachers posting resources for homeschooling parents and community efforts to provide additional PPE to health care workers. However, the tenor of the debate over "stay at home orders", nationally and locally, is one example of how the stress of this crisis is pulling us apart.

This isn't surprising considering that the root of most conflict is a sense that one person's or group's needs are incompatible with those of another person or group. This perceived incompatibility gives rise to the fear that each of us must fight to get our needs met.

Right now, our state is wrestling with how to meet two very important needs - health and economic security. Many among us fear only one of these needs can be met. Either we can all stay home and avert larger scale loss of life but lose our livelihoods or we can all go to work and restore the economy but increase the number of lives lost. Conflict has a toxic impact on our brain leading us to think in "either or" terms -- but there is a better way. There is a better way not just for the terms of "stay at home orders" but for the myriad economic, health and other COVID-19 impacts that we will be addressing for years to come.



The AMC Executive Committee meets weekly to discuss issues facing counties statewide and association operations.

Continues on page 9.

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Misfortune or Opportunity? You Be the Judge.

By Rich Sve, Lake County Commissioner, 2020 AMC President

Misfortune or opportunity? This is the yin and yang or the comparative choices of my service as an elected official. Blessed or cursed? Allow yourself to judge.

The first elected position I held was Township Supervisor. After taking the oath of office and prior to the first Board meeting I was to attend, the Town held a Planning and Zoning meeting to address the applications for a rezone and a variance for an expansion to an existing resort.

This was a highly contentious hearing and those, other than the applicant, who spoke, were in opposition to the proposed modifications. After two very long and heated hearings the rezone and variance were approved. The Clerk of the Board, with 20 years of experience, said that in all her years she had never seen a new Supervisor have to endure so much at their first meeting, a baptism by fire, she said.

My first year as county commissioner began as normal as anyone could hope and I was beginning to acclimate to the environment I now was in. I had not reached the mid-point of that first year, when the Lake County Board of Commissioners posted an RFP seeking funding to build fiber to all of the homes throughout Lake County. The company we hired was successful in securing \$65 million in grant and loan dollars from the recently established America Reinvestment and Recovery Act. This set the county board on a roller coaster ride up, down and through inconceivable difficulties and roadblocks that are too numerous to now recount. We stepped off that roller coaster last June. Looking back at that timeline, it consumed 11 years. Born again by fire?

I was sworn in as AMC President this past December. The year started normally enough, and I was immersed in the business, meetings, and interactions of the association. All one could want from this position. Then a virus found its way to our shores. Now we find ourselves sequestered at home and conducting business in a wholly different atmosphere. My role as President is now shifted to being adaptive. I have not contemplated what this baptism may be. Yet, we as leaders readjust. We turn to our training, and our networks. We rely on our experiences and expertise. We engage our fellow board members, our staff, and this organization, AMC, an inexhaustible and crucial source of information and resources.

What I learned at my first meeting as an elected official has served me well on the Lake County Planning Commission and interactions with my constituents. The years of struggle to build a state-of-the-art fiber to the home broadband network in rural Lake County has paid back incalculable dividends, as students and adults now work from home.

Who can say what we will learn from the pandemic we now battle, but I am sure there will great lessons from which we will glean critical insight into innumerable subjects.

As for myself; well, maybe this should be my last position. It's been said that you can only be baptized so many times. ■



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To Contribute: Story ideas, articles and photographs are welcome. Please e-mail pizinger@mncounties.org.

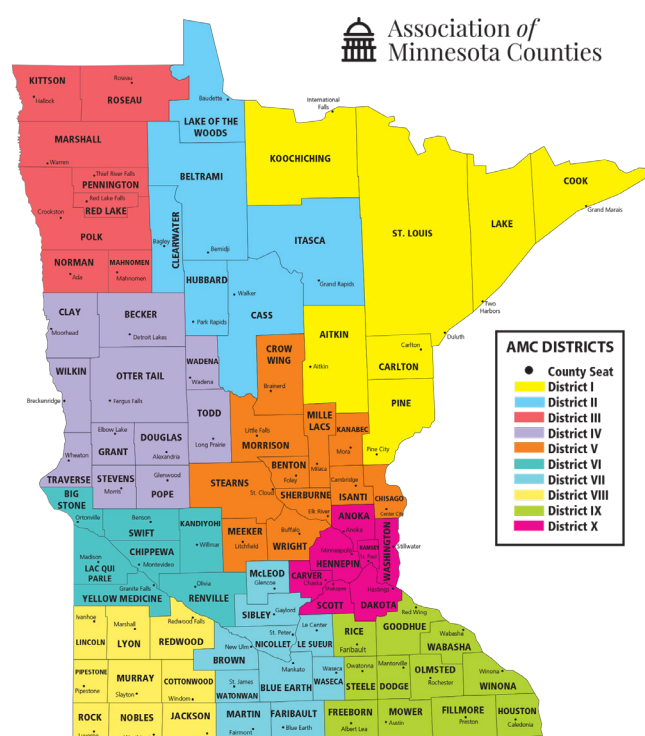
Spring AMC District Meetings Moved to Virtual Format

The AMC Executive Committee has decided to hold this year's Spring District Meetings in a virtual format, rather than in person, due to the ongoing COVID-19 situation. Minnesota counties have a long history of collaboration and now, more than ever, it's important to connect with your colleagues to share current challenges and learn about some solutions that your neighbors may have discovered that could also be used in your community. Even in a virtual format, these meetings will still be able to do just that because they're designed to bring counties together in regional groupings in order to discuss both statewide and local issues.

Each district's meeting will be held from 9:00 - 11:30 a.m. on the originally scheduled meeting date (schedule below). Links and log-in information for the virtual meeting, as well as finalized agendas, will be sent by email and posted online closer to the meeting date.

- District 1: Thursday, May 28
- District 2: Wednesday, June 10
- District 3: Thursday, June 11
- District 4: Friday, June 12
- District 5: Monday, June 8
- District 6: Friday, June 5
- District 7: Wednesday, June 3
- District 8: Thursday, June 4
- District 9: Monday, June 1
- District 10: Friday, May 29

Look for details by email and at www.mncounties.org/meetings_and_education/district_meetings. ■



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Minnesota Counties

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NRM-12873MN (01/18)

Federal Perspective

By Megan Knight, Federal Liaison,
Lockridge Grindal Nauen



CORONAVIRUS RELIEF UPDATE

The latest federal action to address the coronavirus pandemic was the passage of \$484 billion in new pandemic relief funds to bolster a tapped-out small business aid program, pay for additional coronavirus testing, and help hospitals deluged by sick patients. The Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act was passed by Congress on April 23 and signed by President Trump the next day. A summary of the bill can be found below:

Paycheck Protection Program

The third coronavirus response package, the CARES Act, provided \$349 billion for the Paycheck Protection Program, which offers low-interest loans guaranteed by the Small Business Administration (SBA). Loans can be forgiven for borrowers that pay eligible payroll expenses or rehire workers over eight weeks. The newest legislation increases the amount available to businesses by \$310 billion, bringing the combined total from Phases 3 and 3.5 to \$659 billion.

Disaster Loans

The CARES Act provided \$10 billion to expand the SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program to cover businesses, cooperatives, employee stock ownership plans, and tribal businesses with 500 or fewer employees, as well as sole proprietors and independent contractors. Phase 3.5 would provide a second tranche of \$10 billion to replenish the disaster loan program. It would also provide \$50 billion for additional SBA guarantees under its broader disaster loan program.

Hospital Funding

The Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act would provide \$75 billion for health-care providers through the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund. The money could be used to reimburse providers for coronavirus-related expenses and lost revenue. Funds would be distributed under the same terms as the CARES Act, which provided \$100 billion for those purposes.

Virus Testing

The bill would provide \$25 billion for Covid-19 testing, including for active infections and previous exposure, through the Public Health and Social Services Emergency Fund. The funding would include \$11 billion for states, localities, territories, and tribes and would distribute at least \$4.25 billion directly to those entities based on their relative number of Covid-19 cases.

Other Spending

The Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act includes the following additional spending measures:

- \$1 billion for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for activities such as surveillance, contact tracing, and lab capacity expansion.
- \$1 billion for the National Institutes of Health to develop testing and accelerate research on rapid testing, plus \$500 million for the National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering and \$306 million for the National Cancer Institute.
- \$1 billion for the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority for research, manufacturing, and purchasing tests.
- \$600 million for community health centers and federally qualified health centers, as well as \$225 million for rural health clinics.

UNITED STATES SENATE

Senator Klobuchar, Colleagues Urge Administration to Increase Number of Doctors in Rural and Other Medically Underserved Areas

U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Representative Brad Schneider (D-IL-10) along with their colleagues in both the House and the Senate, wrote to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) urging the Administration to resume premium processing for physicians seeking employment-based visas. Doctors on these visas increase access to health care, especially in rural areas, through the Conrad 30 program, which allows foreign medical school graduates who have been trained in the United States to stay in the country as long as they serve underserved areas.

"On March 20, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced the immediate and temporary suspension of premium processing for all Form I-129 and I-140 petitions due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We are deeply concerned that this suspension will exacerbate physician shortages, particularly in rural areas, and at the leading academic and research organizations that depend on health care provided by physicians who graduated from foreign medical schools," the members wrote. Minnesota Senator Tina Smith (D-MN) also joined the letter.

Senator Smith Presses to Sustain Rural Hospitals and Providers Amid Pandemic

Senator Smith helped introduce the bipartisan Immediate Relief for Rural Facilities and Providers Act, which would seek to stabilize rural hospitals and provide resources to health care providers as the coronavirus strains health care systems in Minnesota and across the country. "As we all work to combat the coronavirus, I think about how important rural hospitals and providers are as public health experts in Minnesota and across the country" said Senator Smith, a member of the Senate Health Committee and leader of the bipartisan Senate Rural Working Group.

Despite rural health care facilities providing vital services for Minnesotans and Americans, many rural providers have been forced to close or to dramatically reduce operations, damaging the health and economies of rural communities. Last year marked the most closures of rural hospitals in history, and 2020 is on pace to double that record. With federal assistance from the Immediate Relief for Rural Facilities and Providers Act, rural hospitals and providers could keep their doors open, make payroll, and continue serving their communities.

Senator Klobuchar Introduces Bill to Help Rural Broadband Connectivity During Pandemic

Senators Amy Klobuchar and Kevin Cramer (R-ND), along with a number of the colleagues, introduced the Keeping Critical Connections Act to help small broadband providers ensure rural broadband connectivity for students and their families during the coronavirus pandemic. The Keeping Critical Connections Act would appropriate \$2 billion for a Keeping Critical Connections fund at the FCC under which small broadband providers with fewer than 250,000 customers could be compensated for broadband

services—if they provided free or discounted broadband services or upgrades—during the pandemic for low-income families who could not afford to pay their bills or provided distance learning capability for students.

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Congresswoman Craig Introduces Legislation Investing in Minnesota Small Towns

Congresswoman Angie Craig introduced the Small Cities and Towns Investment Act to provide small cities, towns, and townships with a new grant program that would allow them to invest in their communities and stimulate their economies following the COVID-19 pandemic. The Congresswoman convened mayors, school officials, health care professionals, business owners, transit directors, and family farmers from the Second Congressional District where she heard the need for direct support from the federal government as the demands on our rural communities increase.

The Small Cities and Towns Investment Act would begin to address this problem by injecting additional block grant money directly to small cities, towns, and other units of local government. The bill aims to increase funding from USDA Rural Development for a number of public needs such as improving essential community facilities, health care facilities, public transportation, child care centers, community centers, broadband and far more. Towns with a population of 30,000 and under could apply to the \$10 Billion grant program. The Minnesota Association of Small Cities has worked with Congressman Craig's office on this idea and has been in support of this proposed legislation.

WHITE HOUSE & ADMINISTRATION

Rural Health Providers Get Extra Time to Seek Telecom Discounts

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is giving rural hospitals and other health care providers two extra months to apply for discounts on telecom services in response to the coronavirus. The Rural Health Care Program application deadline will be June 30 instead of the end of April, the FCC said in an order adopted in early April. The order also lets some providers keep existing telecom service contracts for another year, and gives them more time to file invoices and meet other program rules. The program helps subsidize rural telehealth costs and provides a separate 65% discount for providers on some broadband expenses.

Proposed Department of Transportation Budget Emphasizes Rural Investments

The President released his fiscal year 2021 federal budget proposal. As part of his proposal, the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) funding would be reduced by about \$3 billion, while at the same time vowing to give rural projects a boost and to bolster highway, transit and aviation safety programs. General fund appropriations for the DOT under the Trump administration's spending proposal would dip to \$21.6 billion - a 13% cut from the funding level enacted in fiscal 2020 - making it one of multiple departments slated for cuts under the president's sweeping blueprint for slashing domestic, non-military programs.

The Federal Highway Administration programs would be reauthorized with some \$50.7 billion in 2021, with the White House making clear that the onus still falls on states and localities - not the federal government - to prioritize their respective infrastructure challenges and needs. The budget provides \$1 billion to the DOT's Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development, or BUILD, competitive grant program, which funds innovative projects that enhance quality of life and economic competitiveness in communities across the nation, particularly in rural areas. The budget also allocates \$1 billion to the Infrastructure for Rebuilding America, or INFRA, competitive grant program, which provides seed money to spur non-federal investment in large projects that relieve congestion on the nation's multimodal freight network.

FCC Establishes \$20 Billion Rural Broadband Expansion Fund

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is creating a \$20.4 billion program to subsidize the construction of broadband networks in unserved parts of the U.S. over the next decade. Electric cooperatives, phone companies, satellite operators, and other telecom providers will compete for funding to expand broadband to areas where the FCC estimates some 6 million homes and businesses lack internet service.

The FCC's three Republican-appointed members voted to approve the program, which succeeds the agency's recently expired Connect America Fund. The agency's two Democratic-appointed commissioners approved in part and dissented in part. The subsidies will be allocated from the agency's Universal Service Fund, which is collected from fees on consumers' monthly phone bills.

USDA Invests \$11 Million in Broadband for Rural Minnesota Communities

USDA Deputy Secretary Stephen Censky announced a USDA investment of \$11 million in three, high-speed broadband infrastructure projects that will create or improve rural e-Connectivity for more than 1,395 rural households and nearly 120 businesses throughout several counties in Minnesota and northern Iowa. This is one of many funding announcements in the first round of USDA's ReConnect Pilot Program investments.

Harmony Telephone Company will use a \$2.7 million ReConnect Program loan and a \$2.7 million ReConnect Program grant to construct a fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) network to connect 577 households, a health care center and a critical community facility spread over 143 square miles in several counties bordering southern Minnesota and northern Iowa.

Consolidated Telephone Company (CTC) will use a \$5.2 million ReConnect Program grant to construct a fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) network of up to one gigabit of symmetrical high-speed internet to nearly 700 homes and public facilities in portions of Cherry and Great Scott townships in Minnesota's Iron Range. CTC will leverage existing middle-mile infrastructure, in partnership with Northeast Service Cooperative, and require only an additional 157.1 miles of new FTTP construction. ■

LOCKRIDGE GRINDAL NAUEN Federal Relations Group will continue to work diligently on behalf of the Association of Minnesota Counties and with the Members of the Minnesota Delegation on the aforementioned issues and continuously report back with updates. Please do not hesitate to contact us at (202) 544-9840 if you have any questions or if there are any areas of interest you would like an update on that were not discussed in this article.

In Unprecedented Times, Local Government Forges On

By Rich Sve, President, Association of Minnesota Counties,
and Mike Mornson, President, League of Minnesota Cities

Daily life has changed dramatically in the past few weeks. Families are facing uncertainty about their work and health. One thing Minnesotans can count on, though, is that their neighbors in local government are ready to help.

When local government works, it's nearly invisible. But during a time of crisis when so much has been disrupted, the consistent delivery of basic government services can give us all comfort. If you need to call 911, someone will answer; when you turn on your faucets, there will be clean water; when you need social services and resources, a social worker will respond.

Critical services aren't the only thing local governments are providing during this pandemic. As leaders of the League of Minnesota Cities and the Association of Minnesota Counties, we've come across numerous examples of cities and counties going above and beyond to support their communities. When the Red Cross said there was a critical need for blood, Lake County gave its employees time off during the workday to donate. Minneapolis park employees are blocking car traffic from some parkways to accommodate an unprecedented number of walkers and bikers who are attempting to social distance. In Delano, city staff are delivering frozen meals to seniors who rely on lunches served at the senior center that operated out of City Hall before the pandemic. In Chippewa County, the Sheriff's Office is helping with the distribution of meals to school-aged children. And while businesses are getting innovative to continue providing services, so too are local governments. From remote city council meetings and virtual building inspections to telehealth visits by public health and social services, cities and counties are ensuring your needs and the needs of the most vulnerable are being met.

Like federal and state officials, our local government leaders are making the best decisions they can in real time, knowing that a priority from yesterday may not be the same today or tomorrow. They are deeply committed to ensuring we all have reliable essential services — a hallmark of local government in Minnesota for generations that will continue long past this pandemic.

So take a moment to send an email or give a wave (from at least six feet away) to say thank you to a city or county worker or a local elected official who continues to go to work and take risks for us all during this worldwide crisis. The mission of government has never been clearer or more tested in these moments. The stories we've shared are just a few examples in the sea of good deeds, perseverance and hard work occurring among the tens of thousands of local government workers here in Minnesota and for that, we are grateful. ■



Nicollet County employees hold a handmade mask collection.



Le Sueur County offered a curbside pizza pick-up for lunch to boost staff morale, where they could drive up and get a personal pan pizza and a "May Day" goodie bag with items purchased by fellow employees.



Morrison County employees helped collect items for a local food bank.



Pope/Douglas Solid Waste Management is helping the public dispose of household hazardous waste while wearing face masks and using social distancing.



Wilkin County employees demonstrate social distancing on the courthouse steps as part of their National County Government Week activities.



Workers' Compensation: New Temporary COVID-19 Presumption

The Minnesota Workers' Compensation Act (WCA) excludes some illnesses or exposures, including "ordinary diseases of life." For most employers and employees, COVID-19 is not compensable under the WCA because it is an ordinary disease of life such as the flu. However, for certain first responders and health care providers who contract a communicable disease, there is a presumption that it was contracted in the course and scope of their employment. The 2020 Minnesota Legislature chose to expand the number of employees who would be covered by a presumption if they contract COVID-19.

Expanded Presumption for COVID-19 Took Effect April 8

The new legislation makes it clear that contraction of COVID-19 will be compensable for certain public safety and health care employees if they have a positive laboratory test or written documentation from the employee's licensed physician, licensed physician assistant or licensed advanced practice registered nurse and the presumption is not rebutted.

Where the presumption applies, the employer/MCIT will still investigate when and where the contraction of the COVID-19 occurred. If through the investigation, it is learned that the employee did not have COVID-19 or the exposure occurred outside of the employment, there may not be workers' compensation coverage.

Employees covered by the new presumption:

- Peace officer defined by Minnesota Statutes, Section 626.84
- Firefighter
- Paramedic
- Nurse, health care workers
- Corrections officer or security counselor employed by state or political subdivision at a corrections, detention or secure treatment facility
- Emergency medical technician
- Health care provider, nurse or assistive worker employed in a health care, home care or long-term care setting with direct COVID-19 patient care or ancillary work in COVID-19 patient units
- Workers required to provide child care to first responders and health care workers under Executive Order 20-02 and 20-19.

The new presumption includes correctional officers and health care providers within a hospital setting. Prior to April 8, 2020, these employees were not covered by the presumption. This presumption took effect April 8 and sunsets May 1, 2021.

General Presumption for Contagious or Infectious Disease

After the COVID-19 presumption expires, the original general presumption remains in place. Minnesota Statutes, Section 176.011, subdivision 15 (b), provides a presumption that "any individual who by nature of their position provides emergency medical care, or an employee who was employed as a licensed police officer under section 626.84, subdivision 1; firefighter; paramedic; state correctional officer; emergency medical technician; or licensed nurse providing emergency medical care and who contracts an infectious or communicable disease to which the employee was exposed in the course of employment outside of a hospital" may have a compensable work-related occupational illness.

Because MCIT members employ staff in many of the job categories indicated above, MCIT recommends that potential COVID-19 exposures be handled in the same manner as any other contagious or blood borne pathogen. If an employee claims exposure to COVID-19, an accident report and a First Report of Injury should be sent to MCIT through the online member portal at MCIT.org.

The specifics of the potential exposure should be outlined, including the source of exposure, and whether a test for the disease was performed.

MCIT investigates the compensability of each claim it receives, including any exposures outside of the employee's work activities or work environment. This practice applies to claims allegedly arising from a diagnosis of COVID-19.

Treatment and Prevention

There is no known treatment for the virus. Generally speaking, health professionals are instructing exposed persons to remain home sometimes up to 14 days. When a physician verifies that the cause of an employee's inability to work arises out of a work injury/illness, the employee is entitled to wage replacement benefits under Minnesota Statutes, section 176.101, subdivision 1.

Workers' compensation will pay for tests and any subsequent medical expenses where COVID-19 is diagnosed as a work-related injury/illness.

Currently there is no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. Ideally, the best prevention is to avoid the virus, but when this is not possible, follow the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Members with specific questions, should direct them to MCIT at info@mcit.org.

Aitkin County Auditor Joins MCIT Board

The resignation of former Washington County Auditor Kevin Corbid from the MCIT Board of Directors began a search of county commissioners, auditors and auditor-treasurers to fill the vacancy. The board interviewed three individuals and voted unanimously at their February meeting to appoint Aitkin County Auditor Kirk Peysar (pictured at right) to the seat.



Peysar joined the board for the March 13 meeting. He will serve until MCIT's annual meeting in December, at which time the seat will be filled by election for a new four-year term ending Dec. 31, 2024.

Decades of County Experience

Peysar has 30 years of county experience, 22 as an elected auditor. Prior to being auditor, he worked in Aitkin County's health and human services department.

Outside of county experience, Peysar currently serves as the secretary-treasurer of the Minnesota Association of County Officers. He has also served as the treasurer of the Minnesota Federation of County Fairs and director of its district 6. Peysar serves on the boards of the Minnesota Counties Information System, Aitkin County Agricultural Society, Aitkin County Historical Society and Aitkin Chamber of Commerce.

Peysar says, "I am excited about the opportunity to serve on the MCIT Board of Directors. I feel that my experience serving on a variety of boards will bring knowledge, skills and perspective that could assist the organization." ■

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Local Health Departments Lead in Responding to COVID-19



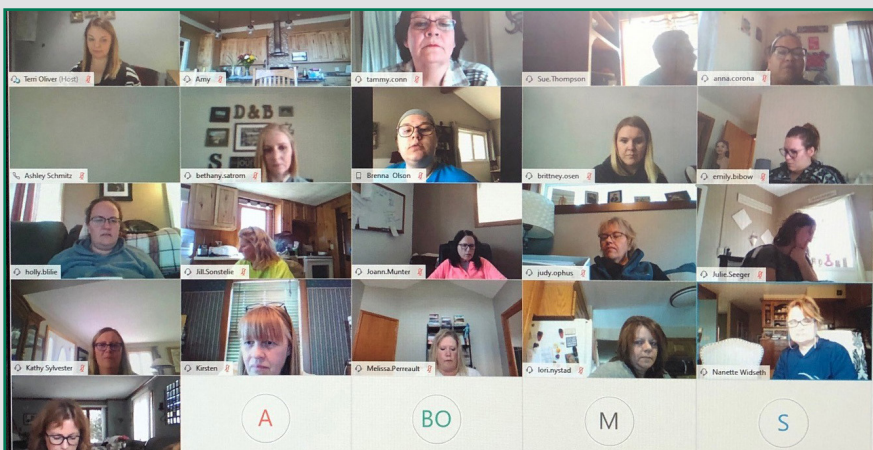
By Kari Oldfield, LPHA Director

Responding to disasters and emergencies is a core responsibility of Minnesota's local public health departments. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact our communities and every aspect of daily life, local public health plays a key role in responding to and mitigating the ongoing risks from the virus.

To most effectively respond, local public agencies throughout the state are leading in their incident command (IC) structures. In Dakota County, for example, their team of internal partners includes the sheriff's office, risk management, county communications and schools. IC structures allow for situational monitoring, planning, development of policies, and regular communication and partnership with nursing homes, congregate living facilities, hospitals and other partners.

Work throughout the state continues to support mental well-being. The Minneapolis Health Department has established a mental wellbeing team to understand how various populations are dealing with COVID-19 and are developing messages to respond. They are also providing grant funding to community organizations, to expand community capacity to respond to COVID-19. Countryside Public Health, on the other hand, has started using social media to share creative wellness messages and activities with the community.

Sharing of accurate information is critically important during a pandemic. Local agencies are sharing information both internally and with external partners. They are active members of their regional healthcare coalitions and communicate regularly with local healthcare providers. Many agencies have launched local COVID-19 hotlines to connect constituents with accurate information and local resources. In Carver County for example, the local response hotline is connecting community members with local information and resources including where to access food resources, childcare, and mental health supports.



Polk County Public Health Virtual (PCPH) Situational Awareness Virtual Briefing.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is an ongoing challenge as supplies are being depleted quickly. Local agencies have been completing inventories of their equipment, fit-tested staff to ensure equipment will properly protect those wearing it and are working to obtain more PPE as it is available. Norman-Mahnomen public health is using social media channels to call for community members to donate their PPE, including homemade masks, for use both within the agency and to distribute to the public.



Norman-Mahnomen Public Health staff (including Sandy Boman, shown here) has been conducting "PPE fit testing" (making sure masks and respirators fit properly to insure proper protection) for White Earth Home Health, Mahnomen Sheriff's Office, Mahnomen Police Department and EMS.

As testing for COVID-19 ramps up, local public health will play a key role in setting up testing sites, administering tests, and notifying individuals of their test results. With an increase in testing, local agencies will play a critical role in completing investigations of the contacts of those who have tested positive for COVID-19. In Olmsted County, for example, they are looking at where outbreaks are happening to understand how the virus is traveling and who is impacted to prevent further spread.

Agencies focus on applying an equity lens to ensure disparities are not created or exacerbated and play a key role in collecting and framing data to ensure a recovery that lifts everyone up. In Wright County, they are working to apply an equity lens to all their COVID-19 response work, by assigning specific staff to ensure that people who experience inequities have equitable access to health, medical and financial information, resources and services.

Quarantine and isolation are key tools to preventing the spread of COVID-19. Local agencies oversee, regularly communicate with, and provide resources to those who are in quarantine. For those who are in quarantine, agencies assist with basic needs such as home food delivery and prescription delivery. Additionally, those members of our communities who are experiencing homelessness are at particular risk for being infected with and transmitting COVID-19. In counties throughout the state including St. Louis, Hennepin, and Beltrami, they have worked with local hotels to get spaces for those residents experiencing homelessness.



Watsonwan County Public Health shared this message on social media.

Local agencies have long standing relationships in their communities that are more important now than ever. Local health departments are leading on education, working to understand people's basic needs, and completing regular outreach to organizations and groups in the community. As the pandemic continues, local health departments will continue to be a key resource to their communities and will explore innovative ways to operate in an era of social distancing. ■

Blue Ribbon Committee on County Government Operations

AMC is convening a Blue Ribbon Committee on County Operations in order to examine the lessons learned about county government operations during the COVID-19 emergency and recommend ongoing operational changes that provide more effective and efficient service to Minnesotans by asking the following questions:

1. What new processes did counties try? What worked and should continue? What didn't work?
2. What work didn't get done during the emergency? What were the ramifications of not doing that work? Are there things counties could/should stop doing because they weren't critical during the pandemic?
3. Who has authority to make any recommended changes permanent? Do we need state or federal waivers or law changes and/or best practice recommendations for county boards?

The Blue Ribbon Committee will ask AMC's affiliate organizations to review their area of practice and bring lessons learned to the committee for discussion and consideration. The Blue Ribbon Committee will meet one to two times per week through May using video meeting technology to develop a preliminary list of recommendations and actions to accomplish them. The committee may continue to meet throughout the summer on a less frequent basis.

Blue Ribbon Committee Members:

- Rich Sve, AMC President & Lake County Commissioner, Chair
- Ben DeNucci, Itasca County Commissioner
- Lisa Fobbe, Sherburne County Commissioner
- Marion Greene, Hennepin County Commissioner
- Stephen Hallan, Pine County Commissioner
- Gary Hendrickx, Swift County Commissioner
- Sheila Kiscaden, Olmsted County Commissioner
- Colleen Landkamer, Blue Earth County Commissioner
- Jim McDonough, Ramsey County Commissioner
- Susan Morris, Isanti County Commissioner
- Lee Rogness, Otter Tail County Commissioner
- Scott Schulte, Anoka County Commissioner
- Mike Slavik, Dakota County Commissioner
- Jack Swanson, Roseau County Commissioner
- Dan Wildermuth, Pipestone County Commissioner

Staff Support:

- Julie Ring, Executive Director
- Ryan Erdmann, Member Engagement Coordinator
- Becky Accettura, Project Manager

Perhaps Some Good Can Come From the COVID-19 Pandemic



The pandemic has forced us to make changes and many, if we continue to use them, will make our services more efficient, service friendly and equitable.

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

The COVID-19 pandemic, a serious and life-threatening event, will become one of those life defining events for our younger generation. County leaders, as the providers of public health services and other critical services, have been instrumental in responding to the crisis. We owe a debt of gratitude to the many public servants that work to keep the public safe and healthy.

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted our routines and forced us to be creative and resourceful. County leaders and staff reacted to the pandemic with tactics to keep our programs and services intact while the world around us shut down. These temporary solutions have been inventive and innovative. Congratulations Minnesota counties, you are delivering critical services during this unprecedented time!

Someone once said, "Don't let a good crisis go to waste." It's not too early to begin thinking about how our temporary solutions can improve our interactions with the public and provide more efficient services well into the future. We need to question the outdated laws, rules, regulations and policies that we've bypassed and worked around during the crisis. We've utilized technology to help us avoid personal contact because of public health concerns, but the added benefits are convenience, less travel, efficient meetings, a new view of clients and customers, and the public's ability to conduct business and attend a meeting without being in a county building.

We deployed laptop and even desktop computers to employee's homes to allow remote work. This can provide flexibility for our employees in the future. Will working at home reduce the amount of leave needed for caregiving, parenting, and even employee illness? Can we alleviate the need for some office space and parking lots? Can we hire talented staff that live many miles from the county offices? Will employee morale be improved with the increased ability to work from home? Can we broaden our shrinking pool of applicants by allowing work at home? Can we recruit new employees without the need for in-person interviews? Have we built more trust in our employees?

Our customers of the tax and land systems have quickly learned to do business online. Must we continue to offer countertop service to get a license or to get something recorded, platted, permitted or paid? Must we have an actual signature for various documents? Must we witness, in person, the execution of a document?

During this crisis Corrections Agents have used telephones outside the client's house, video conferencing, and FaceTime to visit with offenders. Does a Corrections Agent need to meet a client in person every time or can we actually increase safety by allowing more options to "see" offenders more frequently?

We did case management, substance abuse disorder assessments, WIC and TB home visits, mental health checks, and more with the use of technology. This is efficient, but also allows more frequent contacts and a unique view of clients' surroundings which can lead to better outcomes. It seems that a hybrid of face-to-face and virtual visits makes much sense. Virtual visits can be client-centered and reduce the no-show rate for appointments. Again, do we need to be face-to-face for every interaction?

The use of ITV for court hearings has saved the transport of in-custody offenders between counties as well as from the jail to the courtroom. This is efficient and increases public safety. Must we continue to hold in-person hearings for all cases?

We already know that aerial photography is sophisticated and adequate enough for assessors to do most of their work at a computer. It seems wasteful to send an appraiser out into the county to view property when an enhanced aerial photograph, coupled with owner provided video or photos, can provide the information for most of the required quintile review. Do we really need to physically see every property every five years?

WebEx is a tool used by many county boards during the stay at home order. The public was allowed to attend and even speak at these meetings. Technology can enhance the ability for the public to view and participate in public meetings remotely. Must a citizen drive 50, or even 10, miles to testify at a public hearing or to be heard at the open forum?

Many meetings, even multi-jurisdictional meetings have been held via WebEx, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other meeting technology, saving travel time and maximizing meeting efficiency. Less travel means saving time, energy, and there are less people on the roads making road maintenance more efficient. Do we really need to travel to every meeting, no matter the importance?

**Someone once said,
"Don't let a good crisis go
to waste."**

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We've used less paper and used employees that had less work to image documents, reducing paper use into the future. We've decreased the use of paper invoices, checks, and other finance documents. Might we actually make strides in becoming paperless?

Not all changes made use of technology. The courts, law enforcement, county attorneys, and public defenders found ways to prevent many non-violent people from being incarcerated in our county jails without sacrificing public safety, so should we put them all in jail when the crisis is over? The State of Minnesota and some counties have also released non-violent offenders early, thus reducing incarceration rates and allowing for better inmate management, health care, and in-facility social distancing. Might we see less incarceration or shorter sentences in the future for such non-violent offenders?

Stearns County has a drive-up window licensing service. It remained open during much of the shutdown. The lines were long but those needing service got it! Were those customers happy that the county had this unique service delivery method?

The pandemic has forced us to make changes. It has showed us we can be nimble. The pandemic has also helped our customers realize they didn't need to be in our buildings to get services. Many of the changes, if we continue to use them, will make our services more efficient, service friendly and equitable. We have a unique, unprecedented opportunity to make the best of a crisis, let's not ignore it. ■

We are fortunate that Minnesota has invested in building government and community capacity to develop solutions that meet the diverse needs of its citizens. Using groundbreaking science in human behavior, the State of Minnesota's Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution, the Association of Minnesota Counties, the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust, the Dispute Resolution Institute at Mitchell Hamline Law School, the nonprofit Braver Angels, and community dispute resolution organizations help elected and appointed public officials, as well as the community at large, work together better by building their capacity for having difficult conversations. These programs help Minnesotans better understand each other's point of view, identify the needs of everyone involved, and develop solutions that address these needs rather than taking an adversarial approach. We call these types of solutions "integrative solutions" because they integrate the most important needs of everyone involved rather than compromise essential needs and values. This work is not about sweeping difficult issues, such as racial justice and regional economic vitality, back under the rug of history; but rather, about building the relationships and capacity to work together in a way that leads to progress on difficult issues.

Today's difficult public policy issues are complex – none more so than managing the response to COVID-19. The public does and should have differing ideas about how to solve these issues. The trouble arises when we lose the belief that we have shared values and when we lack the trust and relationships to bridge the divides. Conflict itself isn't a problem but dealing with conflict effectively is key to a healthy democracy. The type of collaborative problem-solving we lead and teach not only generates more effective and inclusive solutions, but perhaps, more importantly, helps to dispel the stories and stereotypes that have developed about the other side – whether they be Prius driving urbanites or pickup truck driving farmers.

Today's difficult public policy issues are complex – none more so than managing the response to COVID-19. The trouble arises when we lose the belief that we have shared values and when we lack the trust and relationships to bridge the divides.

It helps us realize that whether or not we agree on what to do about COVID-19 and other matters of public policy, we can cultivate an understanding of each other's concerns and needs in a way that fosters the relationships needed to do the hard work of managing COVID-19 and the unending work of building a better community for all Minnesotans.

We can all agree that our approach to managing COVID-19 should be one that integrates the important needs of health and economic security. That might seem obvious, but when we get down into the details about how to do that, it gets harder. However, holding the shared commitment to find integrative solutions makes it possible. As we all wrestle with how to best manage COVID-19, we offer you some guiding principles based on our experience:

- **Recognize and focus on shared values.** While individuals hold different positions on controversial issues, they are generally motivated by the same core set of values such as fairness, integrity, and compassion. In the midst of a difficult issue, remind yourself that the other side isn't without values, but in fact shares many of your values.
- **Explore the other side's perspective.** In order to identify mutually acceptable solutions, you must be able to generate options that address the interests of the other side. Trying to understand their point of view will enable you to identify their interests.

- **Commit to developing integrative solutions.** Listen long enough and well enough to understand the other side's needs. Then work hard enough to develop creative solutions that address (or integrate) the most important needs of everyone involved. This kind of solution will not only be acceptable to all parties but will be a better solution because it will resolve more aspects of the problem.
- **Find the good in everyone.** Very few people get up in the morning wondering, "How can I make the world a worse place today?" Most people, most of the time, do what they believe is best. In order to solve a problem with someone, it is essential to find and connect with the goodness in them.

Based not on wishful thinking but extensive experience bridging divides on complex and divisive issues, we know that Minnesota can do this. In the midst of extremely trying times we can see the value in having different ideas about how to address complex issues, we can recognize that we share values with people with whom we do not share ideas, we can foster relationships in spite of different ideas, and we can develop integrative solutions to our health and economic challenges together. In fact, it is the only way that we can.

All of us offer direct services, training and other resources for assisting government and community in bridging divides over difficult issues. If you or your community need support in working through a difficult issue related to COVID-19 or other public issues, please visit our websites to learn more. ■

Minnesota State Office of Collaboration and Dispute Resolution:
www.mn.gov/admin/ocdr
 Association of Minnesota Counties: www.mncounties.org
 League of Minnesota Cities: www.lmc.org
 Dispute Resolution Institute at Mitchell Hamline Law School:
www.mitchellhamline.edu/dispute-resolution-institute
 Community Mediation Minnesota: www.communitymediationmn.org
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COVID-Related County HR Q & A



By Gary Weiers, DDA Human Resources, Inc.

DDA Human Resources, Inc. is a proud partner with AMC and we highly value our relationship with Minnesota counties. Like all counties, DDA needed to respond quickly and strategically to the COVID-19 crisis. Our approach is to make sure that we remain focused on meeting county needs by accurately addressing county questions, developing pertinent documents, sending email updates and enhancing efforts to assist new county administrators/coordinators in the Pathways Program.

We are all aware of the need for smart and quick responses in this ever-changing situation. Speed and accuracy are both important and neither was ignored during this crisis.

Since March 15, 2020, our organization has responded to over 125 COVID-19 and other HR related research requests/questions from counties and county-related joint powers entities around the state. Most of these responses included significant research of ever-changing information from multiple departments in both the state and federal governments. Questions came in as the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) developed into law, regulations, and FAQs, and as Executive Orders were issued. Some specific topics we responded to include the following:

If we require staff to quarantine themselves after traveling/flying, are we required to pay them? Or should they be required to use PTO?

Use telework if you can. OK to mandate use of accrued leave or allow an unpaid leave of absence, depending on your rules.

Our board does not want to lay off anyone, but what do we do if we have to shut down? What are others doing?

Remote work whenever possible, require use of accrued time, let employees run a negative leave balance, allow an unpaid leave of absence, create 14 days of pandemic leave (bargain over any new benefits). Employee can apply for unemployment benefits right away if out of leave.

What are the jobs that are considered a “health care worker” or an “emergency responder”?

We had to wait to find out. The FFCRA does not define them. The subsequent regulations give a description, and then allows the governor to expand that list. The governor published his list and incorporated the CISA Critical Sector Workers list.

If we close and send employees home, do they automatically get the FFCRA paid sick leave and expanded family and medical leave?

No. The benefits are available only if you have telework for them, but they can’t do the telework because they are busy with one of the 6 reasons for paid sick leave, or no one else is a suitable care giver if their child’s school is closed. If their job does not qualify for telework, then the employee can instead file for unemployment benefits.

If we already offer PTO, then does that “count” as the FFCRA paid sick leave?

No. The FFCRA 80 hours of paid sick leave is over and above all other leaves you offer. The employee can choose to use the FFCRA paid sick leave first when meeting any of the FFCRA’s 6 reasons.

If an employee is eligible for FFCRA paid sick leave, do the 80 hours have to be taken as whole days, or can they be intermittent or incremental (like working 3 hours/day)?

The employer and the employee have to both agree to the intermittent use, and to the increment of time used. The FFCRA encourages flexibility. However, if the employee wants to report to the office intermittently, that’s when you need to look at the reason for taking the leave and whether it needs to be a continuous use – you don’t want a contagious employee to spread the virus to coworkers.

Our document development efforts consisted of nearly a dozen new documents addressing county specific pandemic planning, applicable forms templates and relevant policies for use by counties. A good example of this is a document titled “Temporary County Benefit During Public Health Emergency Advancement of [Paid Time Off (PTO) or Sick Leave]” The purpose of the template policy is to aid in the prevention of spreading disease and support the health and welfare of county employees and the public during a public health emergency. Each county was able insert their county name and make a few county specific changes and the policy was ready to move forward.

Throughout the COVID-19 public health crisis, DDA Human Resources, Inc. has sent email communications to counties with up-to-date information and advice. With the fast-changing nature of the situation, emails were initially sent almost daily to keep counties informed with the best available information.

Another point of emphasis has been providing assistance to county administrators and coordinators who are part of the Pathways program. One-to-one phone calls are occurring as necessary with members and problem solving has covered a significant array of topics. Additionally, regular emails have been sent to Pathways members with advice and ideas about dealing with the situation effectively. Since leadership is critical in a crisis, much attention has been devoted to leadership related topics. One email focused on making the most of the opportunities presented by the current situation. New work processes have emerged very quickly and some of these might prove to have long term benefit to the organization and to the citizens you serve every day. Finding opportunity in a crisis can be very motivating and helps keep some of the possible negativity at bay.

DDA Human Resources, Inc. is proud of our partnership with AMC and ultimately with all of you. We are here to serve and provide assistance that is helpful, accurate and timely. We look forward to continuing to serve in this manner, although like you, we do not need another crisis like this one too soon. ■



We Are Counties Campaign Puts a Face on the Frontline COVID-19 Pandemic Response

America’s 3.6 million county employees are on the front lines of the nation’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. Throughout the country, EMTs, nurses, doctors and support personnel at our county hospitals, law enforcement officials, firefighters, public health experts, human services professionals, coroners and medical examiners, and other county government employees, are saving lives and serving communities.

Americans are showing deep gratitude for the daily sacrifices of these essential workers, though most people have no idea they are county employees. The *We Are Counties* campaign, launched by the National Association of Counties (NACo), aims to put a face on frontline workers, while calling on federal decision-makers to provide support for these public servants.

“Dedicated county employees are addressing unprecedented challenges related to the coronavirus pandemic. The *We Are Counties* campaign will show everyone that counties are people – public servants who are making tremendous sacrifices, putting their own lives at risk – to save lives and keep all of us healthy and safe. That’s what makes them heroes,” said NACo President Mary Ann Borgeson, a Douglas County, Neb. commissioner.

Nationwide, counties serve more than 300 million residents by supporting and operating nearly 1,000 hospitals, over 800 long-term care facilities, 750 behavioral health centers, 1,900 public health departments, emergency operations centers and 911 systems.

The *We Are Counties* social media campaign highlights the selfless service of counties’ 328,000 hospital workers, 330,000 law enforcement officials, 93,000 first responders and many other frontline warriors in America’s battle against the coronavirus.

The campaign comes at a time when America’s counties are facing at least a \$144 billion budget impact as a result of skyrocketing costs and plummeting revenues. Counties are urging federal support for counties’ vast health, safety and economic recovery responsibilities, many of which are mandated by states and the federal government.

“We have been strongly advocating for direct and flexible federal funding for county responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and our lost revenue,” Borgeson added. “These are more than just numbers in a spreadsheet. We are talking about vital services our residents need and the people who deliver them day in and day out.”

We Are Counties features pictures and videos of county workers across the country. Look for #WeAreCounties on social media, and learn more about sharing your county’s stories at www.WeAreCounties.org. ■



MACO Names Jill Cordes to Honor Roll, Presents Awards to Outstanding Members

The Minnesota Association of County Officers (MACO) named Jill Cordes, Mower County Recorder, to its Honor Roll at the Annual MACO Conference held February 11-14, 2020, at the Doubletree Hotel in Bloomington. The Honor Roll is the highest honor awarded each year by the MACO organization. Cordes received the honor in recognition of her outstanding service and contributions to the Minnesota Association of County Officers. The Honor Roll has been given annually since 1996.



(From left to right): MACO Past President Becky McCann, Jackson County Recorder, and Jill Cordes, Mower County Recorder.

In addition to the Honor Roll, MACO presented awards to two outstanding members for their service in 2019, one to a MACATFO member and one to a member from MCRA. Individuals receiving awards are voted on by their peers. MACATFO presented its member of the year to Jeffrey L. Strand, Hennepin County Administrative Manager and Deputy Auditor-Treasurer. MCRA presented its member of the year to David Harvey, Hennepin County Recorder/Registrar of Titles Office.

Also, at its annual meeting and conference, MACO elected Denise Anderson, Rice County Property Tax Administrator and Elections Director, as its 2020 president. She succeeds Becky McCann, Jackson County Recorder. Other newly elected members to the MACO Board of Directors representing regions of the state were Linda Karst, Waseca County Recorder, and Janel Timm, Yellow Medicine County Property and Public Services Director. ■

Extension is Open for Business



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By Bev Durgan, Dean,
University of Minnesota Extension



University of Minnesota Extension is anything but closed.

Following guidance from state and University of Minnesota leaders, Extension has canceled all in-person events through May 31 and most faculty and staff are working remotely. But programs are continuing and educators are finding new ways to bring research-based education to all Minnesotans.

Many Extension programs have created new content in response to the COVID-19 crisis and how it has affected people's lives. Examples of these innovations include:

- A 14-day meal kit that can be deployed from rural grocery stores to community members who need to isolate themselves, as well as a 14-day meal plan for consumers and food safety information.
- Financial, safety and stress management information for farmers.
- Online courses and video discussions for community leaders who are concerned about economic effects of the crisis on their communities.

In addition, a number of local county-based 4-H programs now are offered online, such as Crystal Reith, a Cottonwood County educator who is offering animal science programs through video and social media. You can read more about all of these efforts on Extension's website, extension.umn.edu.

These are just a few of the ways Extension continues to serve all Minnesotans. Thank you for your continued support of Extension and 4-H, and please feel free to contact me if you would like more information or have suggestions for how Extension can continue to adapt to changing conditions. ■



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www.stcloudstate.edu/graduate/mpa/



Delivering Correctional Services During a Pandemic

By Carli Stark, MACCAC Director & AMC Public Safety Policy Analyst

No one could have imagined the rapid changes that have been made to deliver correctional services in the time of COVID-19. The system has been flipped on its head requiring probation departments to adapt to a new normal.

It is more important than ever to ensure the use of evidence-based practices, which we know work to help our clients change their lives and protect public safety. Focusing on what research has shown to be effective practices has helped probation departments across the state adapt in this time of change. Supervision is strongly focused on those that present the highest risk to reoffend and client contact is prioritized.

Probation agents are maintaining contact in new ways to ensure that behavioral interventions remain meaningful and relevant. The use of technology not only allows agents to maintain contact, but also to strengthen relationships during a stressful time. New technologies include Facetime on iPhones, Zoom, Skype, TEAMS, WebEx, Google Hangouts, and the list goes on. For clients with access to compatible technology, it has led to maintaining frequent support and provision of services. Some of the resources that were previously provided in person are now being developed in the virtual world. Many jurisdictions are working on creating online delivery of skills groups to address chemical health, mental health, and domestic violence. Probation departments in Minnesota are fortunate to have the ability to be creative in meeting the needs of clients and are figuring out ways to share those resources across counties.

For our rural jurisdictions, maintaining contact through technology may not be as easy. Many places have limited cell phone service and lack broadband capabilities. Despite the limitations, our probation departments have been determined to continue to support clients through other creative means. In some places, agents are still visiting clients "in the field," meaning at their homes and in public spaces. The health of staff and clients is maintained using physical distancing and personal protective equipment. In jurisdictions where field supervision has increased, agents have to drive longer distances which affects the number of clients that they are able to provide services to on a daily basis. Where in an office setting an agent could meet with up to 8 clients a day, in the field it may only be possible to see 4 or 5 clients per day. In addition to meeting with clients, agents must complete administrative work and report writing from home. The amount of time necessary to engage clients has increased in many counties.

Many of the clients that our probation departments work with have limited coping skills for dealing with anger, mental health issues, and financial stress. COVID-19 has made the connection between agents and their clients more important than ever. Clients are isolated, lonely and are reporting that they actually miss their time with agents. Agents strive to be a resource and source of support for their clients so that they can remain in the community.

Drug testing has changed dramatically in the last few months. Agents continue to use methods of drug testing that minimizes contact with clients such as saliva swabs, patches or instant tests. In general, confirmation testing cannot be done. There are a limited number of counties that are an exception and are still doing drug testing by urinalysis through contracts with local labs that have not closed for business.

Another challenge to probation work is the lack of court hearings. When a client violates their probation, there is little recourse in the courts due to the lack of revocation or violation hearings. Except in the most extreme cases, agents are working with clients to resolve the problematic behaviors instead of asking for jail sanctions or revocations. This allows the client to remain in the community but can make accountability difficult.

Now is the time to plan for the surge of work that will come when the courts opening back up. There will be new sentencings and referrals, processing revocations and violations, clients waiting to complete STS, and also a back log of cases that have yet to be filed.

Fortunately, probation departments all over the state are working closely with our fellow counties and departments. Brian Kopperud, Director of Dakota County Community Corrections said it best: "We share, learn, grow and adapt together. Together we are even stronger, and we will come through this to be better than we are now." ■

Pandemic Reveals that Broadband is Truly an Essential Service

By Emily Murray, AMC Transportation & Infrastructure Policy Analyst



Minnesotans have been working, learning, and living their lives from home for the last seven weeks. This has been a challenging experience for those in the most ideal situation, but it has been unthinkable for many people across the state for a number of reasons, and one of those reasons is a lack of connectivity. The reality is that thousands of Minnesotans still don't have access to reliable, high-speed broadband internet. The Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition estimates 17% of Minnesotans lack broadband access.

Giving our children a quality education has always been a priority in Minnesota. Now that our children have been asked to stay home from school, we're seeing a digital divide between those who have broadband and those who do not. Some Minnesota schools are more able to employ e-learning solutions than others. It is simply not a viable option for every district in the state. Even though students have connectivity at school, some do not have connectivity in their homes or adequate bandwidth to receive and send online curriculum assignments or projects. We have seen news stories of students sitting in their cars in the library parking lot in order to get their work done while the building is closed. Students without access to quality broadband are at a distinct disadvantage from students who have access.

Minnesotans have been working, learning, and living their lives from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This has been a challenging experience for those in the most ideal situations, but the reality is that thousands of Minnesotans - up to 17% - don't have access to reliable, high-speed broadband internet.

This divide is also present in healthcare. Connecting rural hospitals with their patients via tablet or other smart device is next to impossible if the patient does not have access to the high-speed broadband and technology that drives telehealth services. With increased broadband and a robust telehealth program, rural healthcare providers can treat more patients working with specialists in healthcare system hub sites. We've been told "stay home if you are sick." Broadband would allow you to not only work from home but to receive care from home as well.

In 2019, the Legislature approved \$40 million in grants over the biennium to address the need for additional access to broadband statewide. During the 2019 grant cycle for the Border-to-Border Broadband Grant Program, the Office of Broadband Development received applications totaling more than \$70 million in projects across the state, with only \$20 million to disburse. Before COVID-19 changed the entire outlook of the legislative session and the budget surplus, the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition was working closely with legislators in the House and Senate to secure additional funding this year to address some of the unfunded project applications.

Despite the change in plans at the Legislature, the need for additional funding has only been heightened by COVID-19. The Legislature is now hoping to use Federal Coronavirus relief account funds in order to reimburse schools and health care providers (including counties) for telemedicine expenses relating to broadband. If those funds are unavailable, they will look to the state general fund. If possible, they are also hoping to secure an additional \$10 million for the grant program to continue the build out of broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas of the state.

The current pandemic has proven that broadband is no different than any other basic service that people need. It is an essential part of our daily lives. We need to do everything we can to ensure border-to-border access. ■

Holding Safe, Reliable Elections During Pandemic



By Steve Simon, Minnesota Secretary of State

No one expected that the 2020 election year would be like this: a state of emergency. As every Minnesotan's life has been deeply altered by this global pandemic, so too has our democracy. The administration of elections is now a public health issue, and it has become the top priority in my office to make sure we can hold safe, reliable elections in this high-stakes year.

To do this, we have been proactive. We have found solutions that match the scope and scale of the problem, and that have wide bipartisan support. The basic goal is clear: we must minimize exposure of voters and pollworkers in polling places, and we must maximize voting by mail. All the experts agree, that is the safest path to take to make sure that we maintain physical distance to reduce transmission of disease.

In seeking solutions for voting in a pandemic, I have relied on the expertise of the county governments that are on the front lines of elections. The perspective of townships and cities has also been invaluable as we all work together toward making changes for public health and safety.

The bill that I introduced, which passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in the Minnesota House, helps protect Minnesotans as they exercise their right to vote, and serve our democracy. It gives flexibility to local jurisdictions,

allows candidates to get on the ballot safely, and delivers much-needed aid to counties by way of Help America Vote Act federal funds. Those funds may be used in a wide variety of important areas, including: ensuring the health and safety of election officials and in-person voters, including the purchase of sanitation and disinfectant supplies; public outreach and preparations for implementing social distancing; preparation for increased absentee voting, including voter education materials, printing, and postage; additional training of local election officials; new polling place locations and electronic roster systems and support equipment, and more.

We need to make these changes because there are serious risks that come with proceeding under the current situation. We will be asking many Minnesotans to participate in 2020 elections by way of our no-excuse absentee voting system, where any eligible voter can request a ballot and have it sent to them to fill out at home. It's a great system, and 24% of Minnesota voters used it in 2018. But I know that we still need polling places, and staff to run the election. And this plan will do everything we can to support them and keep them safe.

I will continue to believe that voting by mail is the best way to conduct a safe election in a time of pandemic. And I am committed, as always, to enabling Minnesotans to make their voices heard at the ballot box. I know that the spirit at the heart Minnesota's nation-leading voter turnout will inspire us to overcome this challenge, and I will do everything in my power to help.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me and my office with any thoughts on this or any issue, and visit mnvotes.org for the latest information about elections and voting in Minnesota. ■



Creating Virtual Solutions for Workforce Development

By Becky Accettura, AMC Affiliate Project Manager

Local workforce development boards were suddenly faced with new challenges in March when the COVID-19 crisis took hold in Minnesota. Hundreds of people across the state that were enrolled in professional development, career services, and training programs needed to have these services delivered in new ways as local CareerForce locations could no longer offer in-person services.

Minnesota's 16 workforce development boards and their partners provide a wide range of services to support jobseekers as well as employers in all 87 counties. Individuals, including dislocated workers, youth, adults, can get help with career planning, mock interviews, and resume development at local CareerForce locations. Youth and adults who are engaged in career development often meet one-on-one with counselors to discuss their interests and skills in order to help guide the way to a successful career. Alysa Hackenmueller, Youth Program Lead at the Northeast Minnesota Office of Job Training (NEMOJT), explains that her team quickly realized the need to adjust career exploration tools for an online format. Career counselors often use interest or skills assessments to help guide individuals to a fulfilling profession. Hackenmueller's team converted these inventories to online forms that could be sent digitally to clients. The customer and the counselor can then discuss the results over phone or video chat.

According to Hackenmueller, the COVID-19 pandemic has also encouraged her organization be more innovative in what services they are providing. Career advisors are using the current situation as an opportunity to focus on professional skills that are occasionally downplayed. "So many employers do Zoom interviews or phone screenings," said Hackenmueller. Using webcams or phones to connect with clients over the past month has provided ample time for counselors to advise on virtual interviewing techniques while also giving jobseekers an opportunity to practice.

Local boards also provide services to employers in their regions. One important role of any workforce board is connecting employers to qualified applicant-s.

Virtual career fairs have popped up all around the state in the past few weeks with great success. "We had 16,000 hits the first three days of the job fair," said Teri Dudley, Career Counselor at NEMOJT. Adapting career exploration for online settings is pivotal for employers in critical industries who urgently need workers. Local boards are often the nexus point between employers and jobseekers, connecting them to each other and to additional resources. Virtual career fairs are also extremely important for the thousands of Minnesotans who have been laid off or furloughed in recent weeks. "The best thing about the virtual job fair was that it was a way for people who were feeling powerless during coronavirus, and afraid they've lost their jobs forever, to feel a sense of control," said Dudley.

Many local workforce development boards were already providing some services using digital or virtual methods before the virus made its way to Minnesota. NEMOJT has used a text-to-email service for many years. This technology allows career counselors to type an email using their professional email account and send it via text message to a client's mobile phone. The individual can then reply via text message and their response will appear in the staff member's email inbox. Solutions like this one have allowed clients to take pictures of a signed form and send it back to a career counselor, making the process smoother and safer for everyone involved.

In Southeast Minnesota, Beth Christensen, Area Manager at Workforce Development, Inc. (WDI) explains that using virtual communication techniques like texting can sometimes have unexpected outcomes. The workforce development board first rolled out text communication several years ago. One client who had been out of touch for a long time suddenly started replying over text, "and explained that she had some extreme anxiety challenges that made it impossible for her to call, or answer phone calls, but that texting was something she was comfortable with."

The surge of creative problem-solving brought on by the pandemic has implications for the future of workforce development boards. Hackenmueller describes that when local boards return to face-to-face services, increased use of technology could help them serve clients even better. State programs continue to move into paperless record-keeping mechanisms and career counselors want to keep up. In an ideal situation, a counselor could use a tablet computer to "go in the field [and] meet a client where they're at," with digital files and forms at their fingertips. Right now, that technology is not widely available in most local areas.

Despite the difficult effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on employers and jobseekers, local workforce boards are continuing to think outside of the box and be innovative to provide much needed services. Find out about future virtual events through CareerForceMN.com, Minnesota's career resource site. To learn more about the local workforce boards, see the Minnesota Association of Workforce Boards' website at www.mawb-mn.org. ■

County IT Staff Makes “Working from Home” Work



By Renee Heinbuch, Director of Information Technology, Washington County, Chair of the MN County IT Leadership Association

The COVID-19 emergency resulted in a huge shift in county operations with unprecedented numbers of county staff moving to work from home. This presented county information technology staff with a challenge they had never faced before, and they responded with innovative and precision. County IT staff moved swiftly to find additional equipment and network resources to accommodate staff who were not equipped to do mobile work. Equipment that had been phased out was updated and put back into commission, new laptops were purchased from the new and refurbished market, and VPNs were set up for secure remote access to county networks, all in an extremely confined timeframe, to keep counties conducting business safely and efficiently. Even though this transition to remote work was unexpected and done under significant pressure, the shift went extraordinarily well for counties, and county IT should be commended for their efforts.

Once the dust started to settle and staff working both in the office and from home began adapting to new environments, IT professionals were faced with addressing new vulnerabilities to county systems. These vulnerabilities resulted from the significant increase in staff working remotely, and from a significant uptick in existing and new cyber threats that County IT had already been combating prior to the current state of emergency.

Data privacy, particularly with county HHS staff who deal with HIPAA data, has become more complicated with at-home work environments. Counties have had to revise their Work from Home policies to account for home workspaces. These measures can include securing sensitive documents, being aware of surroundings when viewing HIPAA data, and only allowing printing from county printers or finding solutions to what would normally be done in hardcopy. Data privacy issues are also becoming more pressing in terms of how counties use remote meeting platforms.

With a huge increase in video conferencing, it has become even more important that counties have (and enforce) remote meeting policies so that staff use platforms that have been vetted by the county to be secure enough for the type of data they are communicating in their meetings. Staff downloading and using their own meeting platforms without county IT’s knowledge can create unnecessary liabilities. We have seen examples of potential data disclosures in the public version of Zoom,

with meeting data being relayed through unsecured servers in foreign countries or meetings being infiltrated by actors who plan to disrupt public meetings (i.e. “zoombombing”) or should not be in attendance at a closed meeting. After a security vetting process is complete, much of a remote meeting platform’s security is determined by how the platform is managed, including preset controls on the “backend,” and in-meeting management. It is important that staff are kept up-to-date on remote meeting best practices to avoid accidental data disclosures and embarrassing disruptions.

In addition to the new set of vulnerabilities introduced by more staff working from home, County IT has seen a significant increase in existing and new cyber threats. Phishing emails have shifted to exploiting the COVID-19 emergency, making attack emails seem like the sender is asking for help with a COVID-related task. Due to significant additional stress and a natural drive to assist with COVID-19 emergency response, county staff are more likely to move quickly and respond to these phishing emails without taking the additional time to determine the legitimacy of each email. This is a completely understandable response to the current emergency, but it is even more important that county personnel continue to receive cyber threat awareness training during these uncertain times.

County IT professionals have also seen a significant increase in “port-scanning” as well. Port scans are used by attackers use to identifying potential points of entry into county networks to gain access to sensitive information. Port scans allow attackers to map the software, systems, and ports in a county network, helping them plan how to conduct an attack. An uptick in port scanning can be an indicator of a coming attack, which makes the increase in scans particularly alarming. County firewalls are able to monitor port scans and control which ports are open or closed, lowering the risk of successful attack. Attackers are also becoming more adept in finding vulnerabilities in third-party software like Microsoft operating systems and the remote meeting platforms that counties use. It is so important that county laptops and desktop are installing these updates quickly as software providers become aware of vulnerabilities and develop “patches,” despite a large number of staff working from home. This may mean extra staff coordination with IT, but it is a small step that can prevent significant issues in the future.

Much of the take-aways from the current COVID-19 situation will be unclear until after the emergency has ended. As IT staff, we have learned the importance of creativity in adapting under pressure and had our skills tested in ways we never anticipated. IT has shown itself to be foundational to how counties conduct business and this will only become more evident into the future. Regardless of what the new normal is post-COVID-19, county IT professionals will continue looking back at these months to inform how we move county IT infrastructure forward for many years to come. ■



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Flexibility Proves Key in Providing Human Services During COVID-19

By Emily Babcock, AMC Health & Human Services Policy Analyst

As Gov. Tim Walz and his advisors laid out the state plan to declare a peacetime emergency to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in March, Minnesota counties were pivoting to a completely new world of health and human services delivery.

"It's been quite a journey for counties," said Becky Secore, Health and Human Services Director in Beltrami County. In a presentation to a Senate HHS committee in late April, she gave an overview of how county health and human services agencies transitioned to the peacetime emergency.



Becky Secore, Beltrami County Health and Human Services Director, presents an overview of how county human services are being provided during the COVID-19 emergency to the Senate HHS committee.

"When this first started counties were concerned about how we were going to respond to these changes at the very same time DHS was responding to the changes," she said. "We were trying to figure out how to make everything work and at every minute something changed. So we started out trying to figure out when to close our doors. It seemed like we had a two-day span between this happening and having to close our doors and at the same time figure out how we are going to serve the population we are trying to serve."

As counties were closing their doors, the governor's executive orders 20-11 and 20-12 gave the Department of Human Services the authority to grant flexibility in state law and request federal waivers. In the weeks following the peacetime declaration, the department issued 50+ guidance documents. Counties were authorized to temporarily eliminate application or recertification requirements for programs such as General Assistance, Housing Support, and Minnesota Family Investment Program. Phone and internet visits were authorized for targeted case managers, foster care caseworkers and for individuals offering long-term services and supports. A complete list of the waivers and modifications granted can be found at the department website: <https://mn.gov/dhs/waivers-and-modifications/>.

As counties implemented the remote work, safety was still top of mind for counties. Stacy Hennen is the human services director in Grant and Pope counties. She said the most immediate safety concern when the emergency was declared was the safety of her staff---and making sure they could do their jobs safely. This meant having personal protective equipment when it was necessary to meet clients face to face. Hennen said as the pandemic continues, safety remains a concern. She said this is especially true for vulnerable populations under the Stay at Home order.

"Where it is a worry is that those community and mandated reporters who let us know when kids or the vulnerable adults are at risk are no longer in a position to see them and do that," Hennen said. "When child protection reports fall so drastically in this crisis it doesn't mean that all neglect and abuse has stopped, it means those children or adults are likely in those risky situations all the time with more isolation and less exposure to potential reporters. I worry about those that are already financially and emotionally stressed and what happens to the most vulnerable people we serve in times like this."

Remote services in some program areas like child protection required staff to be thoughtful and creative to be sure families' needs were met. Trying to work with families and children in creating safety plans, and avoiding face to face contact is challenging. For some programs, counties worked directly with DHS in talking through how to carry out waivers. And in many areas, health and human services agencies simply shifted work to be able to respond to the local needs. This included, for example, leasing hotel rooms or providing additional behavioral health services for individuals experiencing homelessness, increasing outreach to clients to check on well-being, or tracking down additional technology equipment to improve access to services. Brad Vold is the public health and social services director in Morrison County. Morrison, like many other counties, set up emergency centers to work across county departments to manage the response, communications and identify needs locally.

"We stood up our Department and Emergency Operations Center, developing roles specifically around calling our long-term care facilities on a weekly basis to support and be available to answer questions. This was on top of supporting their clients who were elderly."



Megan O'Dell, a Goodhue County Adult Mental Health Case Manager, picking up free school meals that are being distributed at a variety of sites locally which she then delivers to families who don't have transportation to pick the meals up themselves.

Richard Scott is Deputy Division Director for Carver County. He said responding to disasters and emergency is a core role of local public health agencies. This pandemic may certainly test the duties of health and human services agencies. This may include an expanded role for local public health to expand contact tracing and case investigations. But most importantly Scott said, it's going to require meaningful collaboration.

"We are going to be dealing with this in some capacity for a long time," Scott said. "Hopefully we can get better at fine tuning how we respond. Local public health agencies are a great partner with the state, health community, as well as human services, in being able to fine tune our response to minimize the consequences of our social mitigation policies."

In the meantime, key questions remain for where the transition away from peacetime emergency leaves health and human services. In many cases, it will be impossible for county staff to simply flip a switch and return to pre-COVID 19 operations. Even as Minnesotans move past the Stay at Home order, the virus will still be present in communities and counties will need tools to keep staff and clients protected. Staff will also be expected to address the backlogs created within licensing, background studies, facility recertifications, and other activities. Counties will need to reconfigure budgets based on many unknowns.

The peacetime emergency could also offer some lessons. County leaders believe there may be best practices emerging in the use of expanded technology and other areas. This will mean trying to figure out what works to deliver better services more efficiently and cost-effectively. Karen Sanness is the Winona County community services director.

She says some of the waivers that exist due to COVID-19 have been helpful. For example she says the use of video conference could be a useful option going forward related to face to face visit requirements for certain children in out-of-home placement.

"Pre-COVID we were required to see children face to face when they are placed in a treatment facility," Sanness said. "For example, Winona County utilizes North Homes in Grand Rapids, MN, which would require our employees to drive ten to twelve hours round trip to see children that are there for a forty-five-day assessment."



Bree Allen, Nicollet County Health and Human Services Supervisor, in her office.

Increasing technology is emerging as a common theme already in looking longer term. This will likely be a balance. Julie Ellis, Community Supports Division Director at Stearns County, said counties will feel a responsibility to present options to people so they can access services that will be even more in demand as people come out of isolation. Ellis said people will need to have access to technology (both devices and data/internet connection) and Some people will not be comfortable with technology.

County directors from around the state also point out that staff have had an adjustment to working remotely. Kathy Johnson, Social Services Director for Kittson County, says before the pandemic, her use of video conferencing was reserved for occasional video calls with grandkids. She says video conferencing and remote work during the pandemic has freed up staff time and curb expenses. But she says there will always be a role for face to face.

"For me I still think visiting with people face-to-face, sitting in their environment, giving that human touch when appropriate, gives a much richer and complete picture of who a person is and what that person is experiencing," Johnson said.

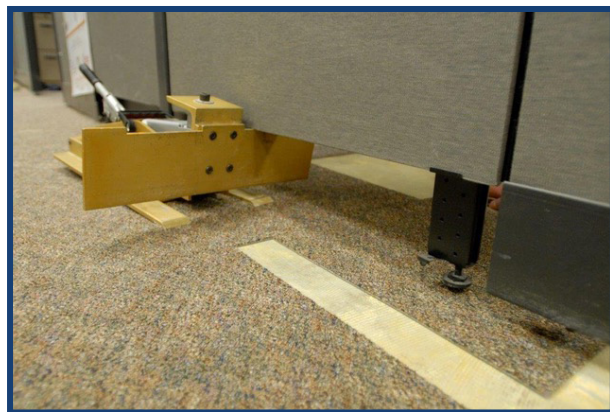
Dodge County Commissioner Rod Peterson and chair of the AMC's HHS Policy Committee agrees there will be both challenges and opportunities for counties ahead. But county health and human services agencies demonstrated leadership, dedication, and innovation in responding during the pandemic. Peterson said it will be critical to allow counties some flexibilities in figuring out what the longer-term opportunities may mean at the local level. ■

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