

# Minnesota Counties



A quarterly publication of the Association of Minnesota Counties.

## Mower County Responds to Community COVID-19 Outbreak

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

In Minnesota and across the nation, communities with food processing facilities have seen large case outbreaks of COVID-19. As food processing plants were being shut down across the country because of large outbreaks, Mower County public health worked diligently to prevent that.

"We wanted to work close together, so that didn't happen here in Austin," said Pam Kellogg, PHN, Mower County's Community Health Division Manager. "We knew that having two large plants in our community, it could be a potential problem, knowing what was going on nationally."



Mower County Public Health's Deb Brehmer, RN, checks in someone as they arrive for the county's COVID-19 testing event where over 2,000 people were tested in two days.

She noted that with more than 2,000 employees at food processing plants in the community, it was important to work with the plants, local health care providers, and community organizations to stop the spread of COVID-19.

"It has been confusing for businesses because guidance has changed over time," Kellogg said, noting many local businesses and the processing plants reached out to public health for help understanding guidance as it came down.

Although the plants were taking measures to prevent COVID-19 spreading within the work environment, local public health noted there was spread among families and those who carpooled together. Kellogg said, "There is also a lot of communal living, and it would take just one person, and it would spread to the whole rest of the family."

As case numbers quickly climbed, the public health department coordinated with the Mayo Clinic, the local plants and other community partners to launch several large-scale testing events.

One of the first events was held in a parking lot at the plant. Mayo provided the testing personnel and local public health registered individuals. They also coordinated with community organizations to ensure there were interpreters available for six different languages. The events were put together quickly, often in as little as four days. "It takes a lot of collaboration, and we had a lot of partners willing to collaborate with us," Kellogg said.

They noticed quickly that they were struggling to get some individuals tested. "The goal was to get the employees to come through the testing site and the employee's families," said Kellogg. "The employees were tired of getting tested, many had already had multiple tests and rumors started going around that it wasn't a comfortable test to get done." They needed to try a different approach and met with the state's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), where they decided to launch a mobile testing site at the local fair ground.

As the first county outside of the metro-area to launch a wide-scale mobile testing site, they knew it would take a lot of manpower to execute but used some of the lessons learned in the metro to make their event a success. On Tuesday, planning started, and by Saturday the testing site was open.

Contracted medical personnel were brought in to do the testing, but the county had to come up with 20 people each day to greet, register, and direct people to the correct locations. They also assisted medical personnel and put together meals for the staff. "Probably the hardest was staffing, it was a Saturday and Sunday and it happened to be Father's Day weekend," said Kellogg. Not only did members of the health and human services team pitch in, but also staff from other county departments and spouses.

Another challenge was spreading the news about the event to make sure people came. Community leaders stepped in to help spread the news about the testing. The county EOC was also able to get permission from the state to use the phone warning system to notify community members of the testing sites. Those interested could register by simply clicking a button when the alert appeared on their phone.

When people arrived at the testing site, they were greeted with posted signs asking them to tune in to a radio station. The county coordinated recorded announcements in eight different languages that stated testing was free, what the test is like, and how to obtain results. The recordings were on loop on the station, so all attendees would know what to expect.

In total, more than 2000 people were tested in two days. Although the number of cases quickly ballooned in the county, they are now beginning to level out, with just over 1000 total cases as of the end of July. "We did some really unique things that worked out well," said Kellogg. ■

**SUMMER  
2020**

July  
August  
September

VOLUME 64, ISSUE 3

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# For Counties, "Normal" has Always Included Finding New, Innovative Ways to Do Our Work

By Rich Sve, Lake County Commissioner, 2020 AMC President

There are two questions I seem to hear daily: "Is this the new normal? When will we get back to normal?"

Normal. Is there such a thing? I suppose there is, but what about in county government? What is our (your) county normal? I suggest that "normal" is our consistency; that is to say, counties have always looked for new, innovative, creative ways to get the work done.

We often speak about county resiliency, adaptiveness, flexibility, and innovativeness. As I look back over the past four months, I am convinced that these words truly describe the work of Minnesota counties and AMC during the pandemic.

Counties were forced to adapt to the rapid changes associated with the pandemic and we quickly learned ways to be flexible in how we conduct county business. Local government has been unprecedentedly innovative in finding ways for staff work from home and still provide of the services on which our constituents depend. When the Stay at Home order ended, we were also able to shift back to providing in-person services, albeit in new and different ways. Counties adapted to this new situation virtually overnight, and for that, we should all be proud.

At AMC it is not business as usual, but the work advances. Like many of your county facilities, AMC took unprecedented steps and closed the doors. Staff now work remotely conducting their usual business in different ways. As with any exceptional workforce, our AMC team continues to deliver.

During this time, I have had the privilege to assemble an AMC Blue Ribbon Committee to take an in-depth look at the lessons learned about county government operations during the COVID-19 emergency. This 15-member committee has engaged a number of our affiliate members to provide input and expertise in their respective fields. AMC staff disseminates the information from our meetings and correlates the findings of the committee and affiliates. No fewer than six of our AMC staffers have been a part of this work, and one of our newest employees, Becky Accettura, doing the heavy lifting.

As we have had to cancel in-person meetings and events, AMC has been looking at new ideas to engage our members. With the timely return of Research & Program Development Manager Heather Bandeen, she and Executive Director Julie Ring have suggested an Association remedy: Julie and I will be hosting monthly informal Zoom meetings called "AMC Coffee & Conversations" from 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. on the first Wednesday of each month, starting in August 2020. This is simply a causal format; an easy way for counties to connect and converse while in-person get-togethers are on hold. These meetings will be a great forum to let colleagues know what's happening in your county or to ask questions.

AMC will be providing more information on upcoming meetings and conferences after the Board of Directors meet and discuss the viability of holding those events.

As I look back over these last four months (it has seemed so much longer), I am still amazed and proud of the work of county government. We have had to quickly adjust to so many unknowns and unprecedented situations in a timeline that is not conducive to the way counties do business. I have spoken with many of you and I thank you for your questions and advice.

We all have an outstanding unity as county officials, and in our membership within the Association of Minnesota Counties.

Thank you for your leadership and in all that you do for your county and your state! ■



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NRM-12873MN (01/18)

# Federal Perspective

By Megan Knight, Federal Liaison,  
Lockridge Grindal Nauen



## CORONAVIRUS RELIEF UPDATE

### Senate Majority Still Finalizing Next Relief Bill Proposal as August Recess Looms

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell waited until a key component of U.S. coronavirus aid was about to expire before drafting the Republican version of the next major relief bill, a decision that is facing increasing scrutiny in Washington. Increasing numbers of virus cases and rising jobless claims have left Leader McConnell in the rare position of struggling to unite his caucus behind a \$1 trillion plan as the \$600-a-week federal boost to unemployment insurance expires. Senate Republicans and the White House have been in negotiations all week over the details of the plan, forcing McConnell to delay the release of the GOP proposal until Monday, July 27. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin touted a “fundamental agreement” among Republicans on a package of spending and tax cuts.

Senators left Washington for the weekend of July 24 with no bill text and plenty of details still to iron out. Even once that’s done, McConnell still needs agreement from members of the minority, who have proposed spending \$2.5 trillion more on a broader swath of initiatives. House Speaker Pelosi and Senate Minority Schumer have rejected the idea of a stopgap unemployment bill that had been floated by some in the Senate majority. For Leader McConnell, the ground shifted dramatically from a few months ago, when he said he wanted to press “pause” on more stimulus. Congress has already passed nearly \$3 trillion in relief, and Senate leaders had hoped that the virus would start to fade in the summer and the economy would rebound, allowing either a narrowly crafted bill or none at all. While Leader McConnell said the weak economy needed another shot of “adrenaline” and backed a further round of direct payments to taxpayers, aid to schools and health care, his caucus has been divided over everything from the details of an unemployment extension to the price tag.

## UNITED STATES SENATE

### Klobuchar-Led Legislation to Expand Affordable High-Speed Internet Passes House

U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, co-chair of the Senate Broadband Caucus, had legislation she is leading in the Senate pass the House as part of a massive infrastructure package approved by the chamber. The legislation in the House of Representatives is led by House Majority Whip James Clyburn and members of the House Rural Broadband Task Force, including Congresswoman Angie Craig (D-MN-02).

The Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act, which Senator Klobuchar introduced in the Senate, would invest \$100 billion to build high-speed broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved communities to close the digital divide and connect Americans to ensure they have increased access to education, health care, and business opportunities.

The Accessible, Affordable Internet for All Act would do the following:

- Encourage Universal Broadband Access by:
  - Including \$80 billion to deploy high-speed broadband infrastructure nationwide;
  - Allocating \$5 billion for low-interest financing of broadband deployment through a new secured loan program; and
  - Establishing a new office within the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to ensure efficient use of federal money.
- Ensure Internet Affordability by:
  - Requiring an affordable option for internet service plans offered on the newly-built infrastructure;
  - Providing a \$50 monthly discount on plans for low-income consumers; and
  - Directing the FCC to collect and publicize data on prices charged for broadband service throughout the country.
- Promote Internet Adoption by:
  - Providing over \$1 billion to establish grant programs for states to close gaps in broadband adoption, as well as digital inclusion projects for organizations and local communities to implement;
  - Including \$5 billion to enable students without internet at home to participate in remote learning; and
  - Authorizing funding for Wi-Fi on school buses so students can stay connected, especially in rural areas where longer bus rides are common.

### Smith Leads Push for USDA to More Quickly Allocate COVID-19 Relief Funds to Bolster Rural Broadband Access

Senator Tina Smith led her Senate colleagues in calling on the U.S. Department of Agriculture to speed up spending the resources allocated within COVID-19 relief legislation to expand broadband access for Minnesota families and people across the country. In her June letter to Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, Senator Smith and her colleagues point out that Congress recognized the urgent need for broadband access in rural communities, and made sure the CARES Act included \$100 million for the ReConnect Program. Senator Smith’s letter was also signed by Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY), Doug Jones (D-AL), Jeffrey Merkley (D-OR), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Bob Casey (D-PA), Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) and Richard J. Durbin (D-IL).

## UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

### Peterson Introduces Bill to Ease Barriers to Economic Development Administration Funds

Representatives Collin Peterson (D-MN-07) and John Katko (R-NY-24) introduced the Reinvigorating Lending for the Future (RLF) Act of 2020 to reduce barriers to lending for recipients of capitalization grants through the U.S. Economic Development Administration’s (EDA) Revolving Loan Fund Program. Senators Shelley Moore Capito

(R-WV) and Ben Cardin (D-MD), members of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

Under current policy, fund recipients must keep up with burdensome reporting requirements that discourage operators from utilizing the Revolving Loan Fund Program to its maximum potential while straining EDA resources. By responsibly vacating the federal interest for those funds made to revolving loan fund operators with a demonstrated track record of success, the RLF Act aims to create jobs and promote lending to businesses.

“The Economic Development Administration’s Revolving Loan Fund is an important tool in the rebuilding of our rural economies as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This bipartisan legislation would remove red tape that discourages organizations from utilizing the RLF and gives more control back to local organizations to support business development and job growth,” said Representative Peterson in a press statement.

### Hagedorn and Colleagues Urge HHS to Provide Relief to Rural Healthcare Providers

Congressman Jim Hagedorn and his colleagues in the House and Senate led 49 Members of Congress in strongly encouraging the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to quickly provide relief to rural healthcare providers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Senators Manchin and Hyde-Smith and Representatives Torres Small and Hagedorn on May 21 introduced the Save Our Rural Health Providers Act to create a new formula to ensure the Provider Relief Fund has a dedicated set-aside amount directed towards rural areas of America.

The letter called on future allocations from the Provider Relief Fund to meet the following metrics:

- A 20 percent Rural Benchmark in the Provider Relief Fund;
- Priority should be granted to facilities that have been significantly affected by COVID-19 preparation;
- Priority should be granted for facilities that provide care for a disproportionately high percentage of Medicare and Medicaid patients;
- Priority should be granted for facilities that provide care for populations with above average senior populations or co-morbidities that are particularly vulnerable to complications from COVID-19 and for populations in areas:
  - With limited access to health infrastructure;
  - With high uninsured patients.

### Phillips PPP Flexibility Bill Signed Into Law

President Trump signed a bill into law in June, the Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act, which was written by Minnesota Representative Dean Phillips. The bill, which passed the House and Senate with significant bipartisan support, will alter the Payment Protection Program with the following changes:

- Extending the expense forgiveness period from eight weeks to 24 weeks;
- Reducing the 75 percent payroll ratio requirement;
- Eliminating 2-year loan repayment restrictions for future borrowers;
- Allowing payroll tax deferment for PPP recipients;
- Extending the June 30 rehiring deadline.

“Our small business owners, the institutions of our main streets, and the glue of our communities, are asking us to take actions to solve problems and engage in some good old-fashioned teamwork ... This bill will help people in the ways that they need, and we haven’t a moment to lose,” said Congressman Phillips in a speech on the floor of the House.

## WHITE HOUSE & ADMINISTRATION

### White House Debuts New Resource to Combat Drug Addiction in Rural Communities

Last month, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy Director Jim Carroll joined representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Agriculture, along with local officials to launch the Rural Community Toolbox (RCTB). The RCTB is an online clearinghouse created by the administration with the express purpose of connecting local leaders with funding, data, and information to combat drug addiction in rural America.

With resources from 16 different Federal departments and agencies, the Rural Community Toolbox is a one-stop shop for those seeking help in building strong healthy, and drug-free rural communities. In addition to funding and technical assistance, the RCTB includes current information resources on over 40 key topics related to addiction in rural America, as well as Federal resources about treatment and recovery support for individuals who have been impacted by substance use disorders.

The RCTB also includes an update of the powerful Community Assessment Tool, an interactive data resource that provides rural leaders with county-level data about drug overdose deaths as well as some of the socioeconomic factors that may be driving local trends in substance use such as education and unemployment. The update includes new data layers on broadband availability, transportation, treatment facilities, healthcare professional shortage areas, economic development districts, and persistent poverty counties.

In addition, the RCTB will also house the Rural Community Action Guide, a sweeping compendium detailing promising practices and effective responses to the drug crisis issued in January of this year. ■

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.



# CARES Act Resources for Counties Now Online

By Matt Hilgart, AMC Government Relations Manager

Through the Coronavirus Relief Fund, the CARES Act provides for payments to state, local, and tribal governments navigating the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak. On June 25, 2020, Gov. Tim Walz used executive powers to distribute \$841.5 million of CARES Act funds to counties, cities, and townships over 200. Cities and townships under 200 population are allowed to seek reimbursement for any eligible costs—up to a maximum per capita amount—from their home county.

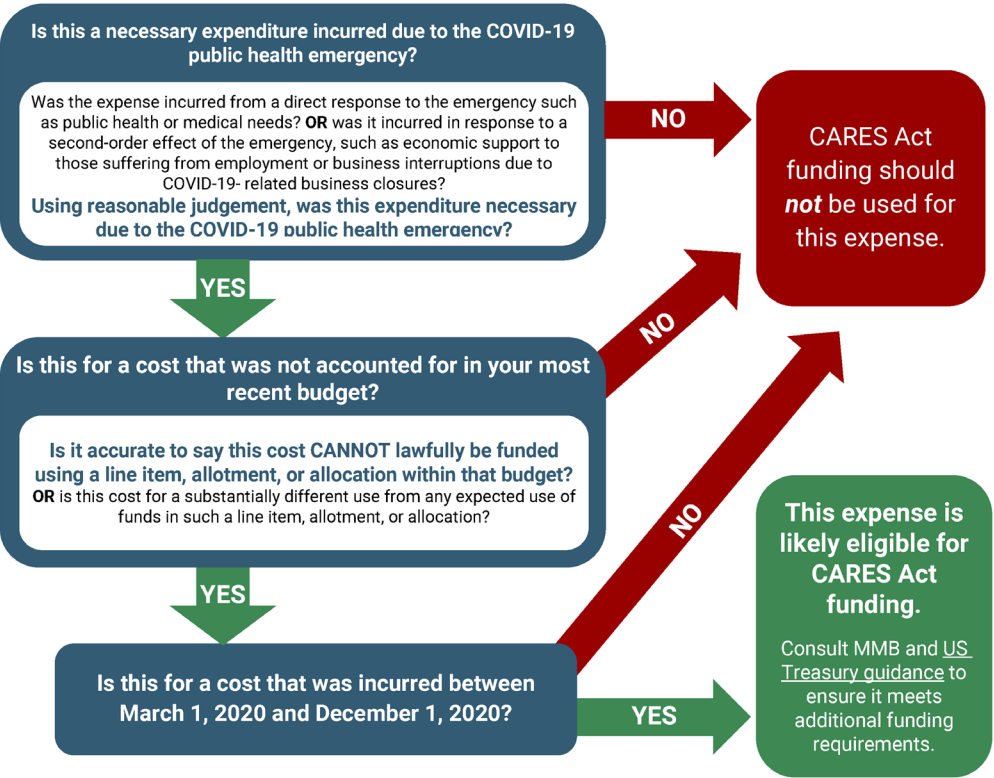
The unprecedented amount of direct appropriations combined with limited federal/state guidance and a short timeframe to spend eligible dollars has created unique challenges for local governments. The Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) has developed a CARES Act Guidance and Resources web page on our web site at [www.mncounties.org](http://www.mncounties.org) (click CARES Act on the main menu). Here you will find links to the most salient information for counties regarding guidance on eligible uses of CARES fund disbursements by governments, including recent webinars, U.S. Treasury Department resources and more tools to help counties in their decision-making process.

AMC has also partnered with the Minnesota Inter-County Association (MICA) to develop a “CARES Act Support Document and Commonly Asked Questions” for counties as they discuss and implement their own plans related to CARES Act spending. This document is intended as a resource to assist counties in their decision-making processes but in no way supplants guidelines or spending rules outlined in established U.S. Treasury guidance. AMC and MICA intend to continue editing and updating this document as more information becomes available and have shared the resource with county administrators across the state.

In general, Treasury implementation and guidance is framed around the expectation that government officials will determine (and document) how CARES Act funds are used consistent with the following three basic principles funds and other Treasury guidance. As reflected in the graphic here, CARES Act funds may be used to cover expenses that are in the judgement of government officials:

1. Necessary expenditures incurred due to the COVID-19 public health emergency, meaning the expenses are for actions taken to respond to the public health emergency including direct expenses and second-order effects of the emergency;
2. Not accounted for in the budget most recently approved as of March 27, 2020 (the date of enactment of the CARES Act) for the State or government; and
3. Were incurred during the period that begins on March 1, 2020, and ends on December 30, 2020.

Visit [www.mncounties.org/cares\\_act\\_resources\\_and\\_guidance.php](http://www.mncounties.org/cares_act_resources_and_guidance.php) or contact Matt Hilgart, AMC Government Relations Manager, at [mhilgart@mncounties.org](mailto:mhilgart@mncounties.org) for more information. ■



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## 2021 Cost of Coverage Reflects Past Loss Experience

The future cost of claims and reinsurance remains unknown, but past experience guided decisions of the MCIT Board of Directors regarding workers' compensation and property/casualty rates in 2021. Scott Anderson, president of Actuarial Advisors, reported that factors influencing rates in 2021 include increases in the cost of claims, adjustments in reserves and significant changes in the cost and terms of reinsurance.

According to Anderson, loss trends involving jail suicides, inmate deaths not attributed to suicide and allegations of failing to provide adequate medical treatment to inmates continue to trend upward. This loss experience affected the cost of liability (casualty) reinsurance in 2020, which increased 31 percent.

In reaction to several recent catastrophic property losses and overall disruption in the property reinsurance market, MCIT's property reinsurance rates soared in 2020. The rate increase of 14 percent was accompanied with the requirement that MCIT retain an additional \$500,000 on every loss before seeking reinsurance recovery.

### Property/Casualty Rates Increase

Based upon last years' experience in securing reinsurance, recent market analysis and mid-year reinsurance renewals that suggest a 20 percent to 25 percent increase in 2021, the MCIT board determined that a 12 percent aggregate rate increase in property/casualty rates is warranted for 2021. As a result, members will pay an additional \$2.4 million for coverage in 2021.

The cost of an individual member's property/casualty coverage will be influenced by its unique exposure base (i.e., number of staff and vehicles, building improvements/remodeling, jail cells and budget, etc.). Additionally, the results of Phase III of MCIT's multiyear property appraisal project will be reflected in the cost of coverage next year.

## Good News: Members to Receive Dividend In 2020

The MCIT Board of Directors is pleased to announce that positive claims development, effective risk management efforts by members and better than expected performance of the Trust's investments in 2019 support a dividend in 2020.

In making this decision, the board considered several developing trends:

- Total claims paid and changes in reserves.
- Net investment income.
- Investment rate of return.

The MCIT Board has a history of returning funds not necessary to the operation of MCIT but are always mindful of the need to ensure that the program remains fully funded and in a position to respond to unexpected events that could affect the fiscal health of MCIT.

Although MCIT continually reminds members that dividends are not guaranteed and will only be announced when it is determined to be fiscally sound and actuarially prudent, members have come to rely on this annual distribution of fund balance. With this in mind, each board member reflected on the financial challenges facing his or her county and other members before voting to return a total of \$10 million to members in good standing in 2020.

Considering the performance of each division, MCIT will return:

- \$9 million from the workers' compensation division.
- \$1 million from the property/casualty division.

Members will receive notice of their specific 2020 dividend in late July, and payments will be mailed in November.

The board will turn its attention to 2021 rates in the near future. As always, rates will reflect the anticipated cost of operations. If in 2021, there is positive development in MCIT operations, the board may again consider a dividend. ■

## Workers' Compensation Rates Decline

On the bright side, workers' compensation rates in 2021 will see an aggregate decrease of 1.7 percent. This is the result of a decrease in reserves, which is attributed to focused efforts to review aged claims and make needed adjustments in the expected cost of claims.

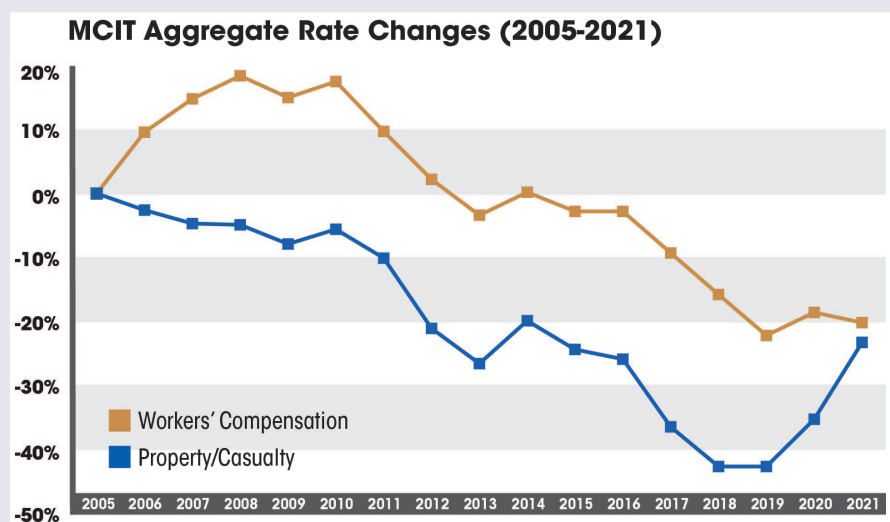
Anderson advised that he continues to monitor post-traumatic stress disorder claims for adverse development. Future analysis will consider the impact of COVID-19 on workers' compensation rates.

Although the rate for each payroll class code does not vary among members, the cost of workers' compensation coverage is influenced by the individual member's experience modification factor or "mod rate." The mod rate is a reflection of an individual member's claims losses compared to the average of loss experience of all members.

In setting rates, the MCIT board is committed to ensuring that rates reflect potential losses.

### Notices Mailed Later This Month

MCIT will mail renewal notices to members no later than Aug. 21, 2020, as required by the MCIT Bylaws. Members that have questions regarding their 2021 contribution should contact their MCIT underwriting technician. ■



### Dividend Decision Making

Dividends are a product of the better than expected performance of MCIT. Using historical indicators, MCIT collects contribution to cover the expected future costs to:

- Pay claims.
- Conduct underwriting activities.
- Provide risk management and loss control services.
- Purchase reinsurance.
- Administer the program.

Contribution dollars are invested until they are needed to pay program costs. When claim severity and/or frequency do not develop as anticipated and investments perform better than expected, there is an opportunity to return a portion of the fund balance—a dividend—to members.



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## 2020 Census Goal: Engaging Historically Undercounted

By Maureen Schriner, Media Specialist - U.S. Census Bureau

**T**he 2020 Census is still happening, but time is running short. While Minnesota has led the nation in response rates, with over 72 percent responding, more than one in four households has yet to respond. Check the response rate for your county, and census tracts within the county [2020Census.gov/response-rates] and take steps to ensure a complete and accurate count of your county.

### Census Taker Home Visits Begin

The Census Bureau will soon begin to send census takers to visit in person any households that have not yet self-responded to the census. The census takers will follow public health and safety guidelines, including wearing a mask and social distancing.

Households can still respond on their own through Oct. 31. If they self-respond, it is less likely they will have a census taker visit their home.

### How Can Counties Help?

Be creative in outreach to engage your county. The Hubbard County Complete Count Committee offers an example of creative outreach. The committee, led by League of Women Voters volunteer Florence Hedeon and Andy Mack, Park Rapids City Planner (pictured), took on a do-it-yourself project to build a handmade billboard, now posted at the corner of Highways 71 and 34 in Park Rapids.

The committee used funds it received from the Minneapolis Foundation, and got volunteers to provide wood posts and frame, to dig the holes and put the sign in place. The “thermometer” of census response rates is updated by Florence as Hubbard County rates rise.

### What Outreach Is Most Important?

Since the majority of households have already responded, those who still need to be included in the census are historically undercounted groups. These include highly mobile people (such as renters), racial and ethnic minorities, undocumented immigrants, low-income households, migrant workers and H2A Visa workers, senior citizens and children under age 5.

In rural Minnesota, we especially need a focused effort to engage people living on tribal lands, people who have seasonal homes/lake cabins (they still need to respond for their second homes), and people who distrust the government. People are most likely to respond when they understand how important the census is to ensure your community receives its fair share of federal funding and your fair share of representation in government.

### Where To Reach Historically Undercounted Groups In Person?

- Rental housing, especially affordable housing where low-income families live.
- Local food pantries, school supply drives and bank/check-cashing locations.
- Areas with foot traffic in low-income neighborhoods, such as convenience and grocery stores, farmer’s markets, and other high-traffic shopping areas.
- Places that have large numbers of people from historically undercounted groups, such as factories, packing and warehouses, and farms.

### Where To Reach Historically Undercounted Groups Virtually?

- Reach out to your local news media.
- Engage virtually, on social media and news websites.
- Engage organizations or individuals with large social media followings to share on social media.

You can find social media content to share @MN2020Census or from @USCensusBureau.

### Emphasize Ways To Respond:

- Online at 2020Census.gov.
- By phone at 844-330-2020 (call 6 a.m. to 1 a.m. seven days a week).
- By mail, complete and mail back the paper census questionnaire delivered or mailed to the home.

For more information, visit [2020Census.gov](https://2020Census.gov). ■



Hubbard County's Complete Count Committee offers an example of creative outreach. The committee, led by League of Women Voters volunteer Florence Hedeon and Andy Mack, Park Rapids City Planner (pictured), took on a do-it-yourself project to build a handmade billboard, now posted at the corner of Highways 71 and 34 in Park Rapids. Photo courtesy of the Park Rapids Enterprise.

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# Travel Time and Mileage When Working from Home



By Melanie Ault, DDA Human Resources, Inc.

Now that it is common for employees to work from home, and with client home visits and other work-related travel within the community being reinstated, new questions regarding mileage arise. How should incurred mileage be addressed when employees never come to the county building? How should time spent traveling to the first appointment, and home from the last appointment, be handled? Keep in mind that pay associated with travel time is determined separately from mileage reimbursement.

## Mileage and IRS

For mileage reimbursement, the IRS requires a single “tax home.” Unlike the FLSA and travel time, this can only be one place, and it cannot alternate week by week. Even if the employee’s time is split roughly 50/50 between the county building and the employee’s home, most organizations will opt to maintain the county office as “the tax home.” The county office is where: the supervisor is (or will be once operations are back to normal), records are kept, performance evaluations are given, training is conducted, and is the mailing address for the employee’s work.

## General Rules for Reimbursing Mileage

1. Know the number of miles in a normal commute. Mileage in a normal commute to or from work (home to county office) is not reimbursable in accordance with IRS requirements.
2. Reimbursable mileage is the travel an employee incurs beyond the number of miles in a normal commute. Therefore, mileage used to visit clients is sometimes a valid claim for a mileage reimbursement.
3. Determine whether a normal commute occurred that day.
  - If a normal commute occurred, then after arriving at the county office, the distance to visit clients and return to the county office is reimbursable.
  - If no normal commute occurred (i.e., started from the employee’s home), and if the distance to the client visit(s) is less than the normal commute, then there is no business mileage to claim for reimbursement.
  - If no normal commute occurred (i.e., started from home on a week where home is the regular work site), and if the distance to the client visit(s) is greater than the normal commute, then the number of miles beyond the normal commute is reimbursable.

## Driving Time and FLSA

Unlike the IRS’s pick-one-place for the year, FLSA travel time looks at the regular work site for that workweek. Either location (county office or home) could be considered the regular work site for that week. Be sure to clearly establish the employee’s assigned work location and hours of work associated to defined periods of time.

On a week when the county office is the regular work site, travel from home to the county office for an 8:00 AM start time is not work time and is not compensable, but subsequent travel time from the county office to meet with a client is compensable. Also, the commute to the county office is “travel before the workday begins.”

On a week when the employee is assigned to work from home, leaving home at 8:00 AM to meet with a client is compensable time, with no deductions for normal home-to-county office commuting time. This situation is viewed as a sort of special assignment. A second reason it is considered work time is because it “cuts across the normal work hours”; the employee is using work time to drive.

If the employee is non-exempt, necessary compensable travel time should be considered when determining an appropriate start time for the first client meeting of the day.

## Travel That’s All in a Day’s Work

If an employee leaves home (that week’s regular work site) at 8:00 AM, the county would pay for time spent driving from home because the driving activity began during the normal scheduled workday. It is “travel all in the day’s work.”

While travel to the first client before the start of the workday (e.g., in order to arrive at the client’s home at 8:00 AM), and likewise travel from the last job site (or client) to home after the end of the workday at 4:30 PM need not be considered and paid as work time, remember to separately consider whether mileage can be reimbursed.

Browse our Knowledge Base on FLSA Travel Time and other topics at [www.amcddahrsupport.com/kb/](http://www.amcddahrsupport.com/kb/). ■



## MACO 2020 Legislative Wrap-Up

By Troy Olsen, MACO Lobbyist, and MACO’s Legislative Committee members

MACO began the 2020 Legislative Session with a full slate of legislative priorities and was working toward passage of those priorities when the COVID-19 Pandemic completely changed the operation of the Minnesota Legislature.

While the focus of legislators and Gov. Tim Walz substantially narrowed in March, MACO continued work with stakeholders such as the Association of Minnesota Counties and the League of Minnesota Cities to influence the language and outcomes of legislation.

Legislation giving election administrators flexibility and funding to respond to the pandemic is the most noticeable. Though the legislation took a long and winding road to get to the finish line, HF3429 (Nelson, M./Kiffmeyer) passed the House and Senate with strong bipartisan support. While the bill did not provide the expansion of mail balloting supported by MACO, election administrators and voters will benefit from other provisions including:

- Expanding the absentee ballot processing time to 14 days before and 2 days after the election.
- Authorizing election administrators to designate new polling places, up to July 1, 2020.
- Allow employees of health care facilities and hospitals to administer absentee voting to residents or patients of those facilities.
- Permitting affidavits of candidacy, nominating and other types of petitions, and request that write-in votes be counted to be submitted electronically.
- Appropriating \$14.3 million in Help America Vote Act (HAVA) COVID response funds allocated to Minnesota by Congress and the President
- Providing \$2.8 million in matching funds for the federal HAVA funds.

MACO is currently collaborating with the Secretary of State, AMC, and LMC on working out Best Practices type suggestions on how to administer elections during a pandemic.

MACO and the MACO Legislative Committee continues to support efforts that simplify, modernize, and make more efficient the operation and administration of county government services. MACO members are committed to providing effective services related to property tax administration, elections, licenses/registrations, vital records, and recording and look for any opportunity to work towards this objective. Our members and membership represent many of the administrative sides of county government and enjoy a healthy relationship with legislators as subject matter experts. We look forward to continuing to work with AMC and other groups at the Legislature to further these important items. ■

Thanks to MACO’s Legislative Committee Co-chairs:

Michael Stalberger – Blue Earth County

Julie Hanson – Scott County

Amber Bougie – Hennepin County

Betti Kamolz – Brown County

Debby Erickson – Crow Wing County



# Extension Returns to Some In-Person Operations



By Bev Durgan, Dean, University of Minnesota Extension

**L**ike much of Minnesota and the nation, University of Minnesota Extension is gradually returning to in-person events and operations.

Since mid-March and the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, and following guidance from state and University of Minnesota leaders, Extension employees have been conducting their educational programs and administrative operations while working remotely. During that time, Extension educators found new ways to bring research-based education to all Minnesotans, some of which may continue even as in-person programming returns.

The University of Minnesota has developed a “sunrise” series of guidelines that help Extension govern how employees return to working on-site. The general rule, based on state policy, remains that employees who can work remotely should continue to do so. For those who must return to work on-site -- as is the case with many Extension county-based employees -- a specific set of protocols must be followed. Those protocols, which require Extension employees to gain approval before returning to work on-site, are designed to keep employees and the public safe.

Employees who cannot or choose not to return to work on-site for any reason will not be forced to do so at this time, under University policy. I have asked the Extension regional directors to work with county staff to resolve these issues individually where necessary.

As you know, these last few months have been a challenge but I am proud that Extension employees found innovative ways to successfully do their work, even at a distance. 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. ■



## U of M Resilient Communities Project Call for Proposals

**T**he University of Minnesota’s Resilient Communities Project (RCP) is accepting proposals for partnerships to begin spring academic term (January 2021). Partners benefit from applied research and technical assistance provided by University students and faculty to address one or more locally identified projects that advance community resilience to economic, social, environmental or technological changes. RCP staff are available to help with proposal development.

Standard RCP Partnerships are intended for Minnesota local government agencies interested in collaborating on anywhere from one to twenty (1–20) individual projects. Cities, counties, tribal public entities, special districts (e.g. watershed, transit, park, school), and regional government agencies or collaboratives located anywhere in the state of Minnesota are eligible. Projects should demonstrably advance community resilience to economic, social, environmental, or technological changes. RCP specifically encourages proposals for projects focused on racial inequities, unjust systems, or the COVID-19 pandemic, and that center communities most impacted by these issues. **The deadline to apply is October 1, 2020, for work to begin spring-semester academic term (January to May 2021).**

RCP staff are available to help with development of your proposal at any stage—from introducing the RCP program and model to your staff, elected officials, and other stakeholders to helping brainstorm ideas for projects. Contact [rcp@umn.edu](mailto:rcp@umn.edu) to get started! ■

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# Statewide Broadband Speed Tests – Coming Soon!



There is no doubt that the lack of broadband is severely hampering working from home, distance learning, and telehealth. There is also ongoing discussion over how well the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and state broadband maps document actual broadband coverage across Minnesota. These maps are used by funders to determine grant program eligibility so any overstatement of available services is highly consequential and negatively impacts rural places.

St. Louis County and the Range Association of Municipalities & Schools (RAMS) have been leading the way to create a different set of broadband maps based to date on approximately 7,000, broadband speed tests submitted by area residents and businesses. These speed tests, mapped by GEO Partners, clearly show the speeds available in cities and townships across the county. Koochiching and Itasca Counties have also launched their own initiative and other counties are considering their participation.



**The success of this project will depend heavily on local units of government, school districts, and community organizations helping to spread the word to local residents so that they understand the importance of this initiative and participate in the statewide broadband speed tests.**

With this in mind, the Minnesota Rural Broadband Coalition decided to take on a statewide crowdsourcing speed test project that will be conducted by GEO Partners and provide a great savings over individual counties conducting their own tests. This is a great opportunity for Minnesota to once again show our leadership on broadband expansion by collecting real-time data on actual delivered speeds of the broadband they purchase and utilizing that data for broadband grant opportunities with the FCC, USDA, or state Border-to-Border grant programs.

AMC will be utilizing our broad mailing list to provide the test link to all members and ask that the link be shared with other community groups and organizations as well as posted on county websites and other social media sites. The idea is to promote "TAKE THE TEST" – 30 seconds of your time can and will make a difference for your community! Here is the link: <https://expressoptimizer.net/public/>

There are two key components to successfully implement this project. First is the technology; GEO Partners has a proven process for that task. The second, and more difficult task, must be borne by local entities - local units of government, school districts, and community organizations - to spread the word to local residents so that they understand the importance of this initiative. The validity of the results increases with the number of people taking the speed test. This is critical for those communities working to qualify for state and federal broadband funding. For those places with great broadband, this is a way to showcase the speeds available in your area and can be used for community economic development marketing.

For more information and a state map with reported test results, visit [mnruralbroadbandcoalition.com](http://mnruralbroadbandcoalition.com). ■



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# Mahnomen-White Earth Nation Joint Emergency Operations to Respond to COVID-19

By Kari Oldfield, Local Public Health Association of Minnesota Director

**M**ahnomen County is the only Minnesota county that sits entirely on a reservation – the White Earth Reservation – making it unique in the state.

Initially, Mahnomen County and the White Earth Tribal Nation each had its own Emergency Manager, but about four years ago, they filled the role jointly with Ed Snetsinger. Now, they are the only County and Tribal Nation in the state with a joint position responding to emergencies.

In the event of an emergency, Snetsinger will pull together a combined Tribal and County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to respond. During non-emergency times, the local emergency planning team meets quarterly to prepare and practice for an eventual emergency. The local emergency planning team works to build community relationships so it can quickly activate people when needed.

"It starts with that relationship prior to that incident," said Snetsinger. "It is important to have those relationships first. Obviously, we cannot handle an incident by ourselves. It takes teamwork".

In mid-March when the COVID-19 pandemic began heavily impacting the United States, the EOC was quickly activated. Eighteen people were brought together to fill multiple response roles, operating out of the Shooting Star Casino, each with specific duties, Snetsinger said. Some of the roles and services include:

- Public information: Shares critical information with the public.
- Planning section: Puts out reports and plans meetings.
- Operations: Uses local and tribal public health to oversee COVID-19 testing.
- Call center: Allows residents to get vital information about services offered.
- Employee line: Facilitates employee testing and monitoring individual symptoms.
- "Feeding Our Families": An initiative to get non-perishable food to the public.

The EOC holds daily calls that include many individuals, such as members of the sheriff's office, the police department, the local nursing home and hospital, Tribal Council Members, the Mahnomen County board chair, county administrator, city administrator, the Indian Health Services CEO, and the Emergency Manager of neighboring Becker County.

Tammy Carlsrud, a public health Nurse at Norman-Mahnomen Public Health, was brought into the group in mid-March. She serves as the Deputy of Operations for the joint EOC.

"On March 17, I was working at my desk at public health and Ed came to see me," said Carlsrud. "He told me the EOC was in full activation now and would like me to join the EOC team; both to represent local public health, and because he recognized how well I could collaborate with our local agencies at the county level, specifically our hospital and nursing home as COVID-19 could have a huge impact on those facilities." She noted that by 1 PM the same day, she relocated her desk to the EOC.

As part of the EOC, Norman-Mahnomen public health department has been working jointly with the White Earth Home Health Agency to do testing of community members. "We now have COVID-19 testing available using a Rapid Antibody test and/or an oropharyngeal Mayo swab," said Carlsrud. "We offer drive through testing and the mobile unit hits the road and does testing in our local communities and villages. To date, the nurses working with the testing have done over 2000 COVID-19 tests."

Carlsrud said public health and the White Earth Home Health Agency then follow up with individuals on their test results and trace contacts to identify contacts and prevent further spread. Members of the team are also working jointly to educate community members, day care providers, schools, long-term care and other community organizations on COVID-19. The response has involved all members of their team, including one staff person who stepped up to work at the local food shelf for several weeks.

Snetsinger said typically they stay in EOC mode a few days, followed by a much-longer recovery period. It's been different with COVID-19, and the EOC has been operational since mid-March.

"This is very much unprecedented," Snetsinger said. "I have been involved in some stressful incidents before but nowhere near this timeline here."

"If there is anything good that can come from this COVID-19 pandemic, I would have to say it's the partnership that has evolved between Mahnomen County, White Earth Nation and White Earth Home Health," Carlsrud added. "I foresee this collaboration continuing and strengthening. I have gained so much knowledge by working side-by-side with these individuals and also made many new friends along the way." ■



Tammy Carlsrud, Mahnomen County public health, performs a rapid antibody test on Ed Snetsinger, White Earth and Mahnomen County Emergency Manager.



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