

Testimony to Legislative Health and Human Services Committee
Richard Mason, Executive Committee of the New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils
co-Chair of the Sandoval County Health Council
May 30, 2013

In May of 2010, the 37 County and Tribal Health Councils were informed by the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) that they were eliminating the funding for health councils. The total cut was 2.8 million, of which about 1.9 million was for the operation of the councils and the remainder was for direct services. These cuts have had a serious negative impact upon the on the basic health of New Mexicans and will end up costing the State of New Mexico many more dollars than they saved in the short term. In reaction to the cuts, the health councils formed the New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils (NMAHC) as a common voice for health councils.

Health Councils are the key coordinating entities for services in counties and tribal areas where they operate. They have different compositions, but most involve the participation of a broad group of public officials, service providers and consumers from the county or tribe. Under the contract with the Department of Health (DOH), the councils were responsible for assessing the key health care indicators and needs for their area and developing Community Health Improvement Plans (CHIP) to address those needs.

Health councils are about addressing the “upstream” factors that affect the health of county/tribal residents. These are the factors that prevent people from becoming unhealthy “downstream”. In the demands put upon budgets, it is very easy to ignore the “upstream” issues and focus on the “downstream”. We all know that this will not only negatively affect the health of New Mexicans, but end up costing the state more money in the long run. In other states, this work is done by local and county health departments. But New Mexico is one of the few states with a centralized Department of Health. This is why the role of health councils is so crucial.

Another factor to consider, The Kellogg Foundation has funded a major health equity project in New Mexico. This initiative funds a number of important public health initiatives in New Mexico. The Kellogg Foundation views the health councils as crucial in implementing these initiatives. So, in order for these projects to succeed we are going to need a strong and functioning health council structure throughout New Mexico. That is going to be difficult without adequate state funding for the councils.

Last year, with the support of many of you, the Legislature included an appropriation of \$195,000 to the recurring budget of the Department of Health to fund the health councils. With the support of the Secretary of DOH, the Governor left this line item in the budget. This is a small amount of money, but already the health councils are working with the NMDOH to see how we can best use this money. The NMDOH has reinvigorated their health promotions work and view the health councils as key to this work.

Next year, the New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils will be asking the DOH to increase the health councils’ line item in next year’s budget. We would also like to see this included in HB2 that is prepared by the Legislative Finance Committee and would appreciate your Committee’s support.

NMAHC would welcome the opportunity to give a presentation to LHHS on the work of health councils. We hope that the Committee will include this presentation in their work plan.

Thank you!

See the opposite side for an overview of the NM Alliance of Health Councils

The New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils

The New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils exists to support and strengthen the state's county and tribal health councils. The health councils have provided community-based health planning and coordination in New Mexico for over 20 years. In early 2011, the New Mexico Alliance of Health Councils was re-established , with three goals:

- a. Establish a unified voice to strengthen and promote the value and services of community health councils, through state and local education and advocacy;
- b. Assist the health councils in seeking and obtaining funding to support community health improvement;
- c. Build the capacity of all health councils to continue and expand their work, through conferences, training workshops, a newsletter, and web-based information exchange.

Governance of the Alliance is by a Steering Committee consisting of one representative from each Health Council, with an Executive Committee representing six regions (including a tribal representative) and three committees (Policy, Resource Development, and Training/Capacity-Building). The Executive Committee conducts the ongoing business of the Alliance (usually with monthly telephone meetings), while the Steering Committee meets once a year in person and quarterly by phone.

Alliance activities during 2013 include working to secure Legislative funding for the health councils; collaborative initiatives with the New Mexico Health Equity Partnership, the New Mexico Department of Health, and other statewide entities; and serving as a support and communications hub for the state's health councils.

2012-2013 Executive Committee Members: SE Region - Alida Brown (Quay County); SW Region - Tiffany Knauf (Grant County); Metro Region - Pat Lincoln (Torrance County); NE Region - Debbie Ortiz (Colfax County); NW Region - Ophelia Reeder (McKinley County); Resource Development Chair - Laura Jaramillo (Cibola County); Co-Chair/Policy Committee Chair - Dick Mason (Sandoval County); Co-Chair/Training Committee Chair - Marsha McMurray-Avila (Bernalillo County)

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