

Testimony
Senate Bill 2031
House Human Services Committee
Monday, March 18, 2013; 9:30 a.m.
North Dakota Department of Health

Good morning, Chairman Weisz and members of the Human Services Committee. My name is Dr. John Baird, and I am section chief of the Special Populations Section in the North Dakota Department of Health. I am also the local health officer for Fargo Cass Public Health. I am here today to provide information regarding Senate Bill 2031 relating to tribal public health units. During the last legislative session and during the interim, I provided testimony and worked with stakeholders concerned with SCR 4012, a study of the feasibility of placing the Fort Berthold Reservation in a single public health unit. Senate Bill 2031 is a result of that study. I will provide some information about public health, local public health in North Dakota and public health services on the Fort Berthold Reservation.

Public Health

Public health in the United States functions at a federal, state, local and tribal level to protect and enhance the health and safety of the population. Prolonging life and promoting health is done through efforts of a number of private and public organizations. Governmental public health has unique and necessary functions and services at each level to monitor health status, improve access to health care, preserve the quality of the environment, prevent the spread of diseases, and respond to disasters. Descriptions of the functions and essential services of public health were presented in the Institute of Medicine (IOM) report of 1988 and have now been refined by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB), which has defined a set of standards and a process to measure local and state health departments against those standards.

North Dakota Local Public Health

The mission of public health in our state is to protect and enhance the health and safety of all North Dakotans and the environment in which we live. In contrast with curative medical care, which focuses on evaluation and treatment of individuals and their health problems, public health takes a broader view, understanding the specific health issues confronting the community and working to address physical, behavioral, environmental, social and economic conditions affecting them. Public health investigates health problems and health threats and works to prevent, minimize or contain adverse effects of communicable diseases, unsafe food and water, chronic diseases, environmental hazards, injuries and risky behaviors. Public health leads planning and response for public health emergencies and coordinates with others for response and

recovery from natural disasters. Public health engages partners and the community to address public health issues, promotes good health, addresses health disparities, and assures the quality and accessibility of health services.

North Dakota currently has 28 local public health units, a combination of health districts and health departments, of which there are multi-county, single-county, or city-county health units. Portions of the land contained in the Fort Berthold Reservation are part of four multi-county health districts: Upper Missouri District Health Unit, based in Williston; First District Health Unit, based in Minot; Southwestern District Health Unit, based in Dickinson; and Custer Health Unit based in Mandan. The attached map illustrates this.

Fort Berthold Reservation

Some individual public health programs are now functioning on the Fort Berthold Reservation, either through one of the local public health units or with individual entities on the reservation. Tribal and health leaders have seen the need to consolidate activities into one tribal public health unit for better coordination and management of efforts. A tribal health authority board has been created to oversee formation of a public health unit and tribal public health code is being examined for adoption. I understand that the tribe is also prepared to provide matching funds as required in this bill to conduct a pilot study and formation of a tribal public health unit. There is an interest to work with the state health department and neighboring local public health units to provide the best services possible. Dr. Donald Warne, Director of the Master of Public Health program at North Dakota State University, is consulting with the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation and providing public health policy advice. All the components required to form a successful public health unit are coming into place, including organizational structure, funding possibilities, public health expertise and local commitment. Changes to state statute in SB 2031 would allow a tribal public health unit to be created and the pilot project funding would allow it to function and determine how best to make it sustainable.

Conclusion

Public health at a local level serves an important role for the health of our state's population and is vital to the long term well-being of our communities. Developing a tribal public health unit on the Fort Berthold reservation would allow coordination of services and better serve the community. Local efforts and support are present to develop what could become a model for other tribes.

That concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

Local Public Health Units and Tribal Lands

