

They are there for your health
By: Amanda Falcone, Record-Journal staff
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WALLINGFORD - The Governor's Council for Local Public Health Regionalization met for the first time Thursday, acknowledging that it needs to come up with a blueprint for local public health departments or one will be determined without input from those who work in the arena.

"If we don't do this, someone else will do this for us," said Council Chairman J. Robert Galvin, commissioner of the state Department of Public Health.

The council was formed as a result of an executive order signed by Gov. M. Jodi Rell. The governor is asking the group to use a comprehensive and thoughtful planning process to determine the future infrastructure of public health in Connecticut.

The council's goal is to approve recommendations and suggest legislation by Dec. 15. The documents will be submitted to the governor.

"This is not going to be easy, but I think we can get the job done," Galvin said.

As the council takes a look at local public health departments and how it can satisfy the needs of both big and small communities, there is talk in Hartford about regionalization and cuts in funding to cities and towns for their health departments.

One hundred nine municipalities, including Cheshire, already join with neighboring cities and towns for public health services. There are 20 public health districts in the state.

Both the governor and the legislature included the idea of regionalizing health departments in their state budget proposals. Under Rell's proposal, communities that are part of a regional health district would receive \$1.25 per person. Those same communities would receive \$1.85 per person under the legislature's proposal. Both proposals would not provide funding to cities and towns that do not regionalize, but have a full-time health director. Funding for communities with only a part-time director would be eliminated altogether.

Currently, the state gives non-regionalized health departments with a full-time director, such as the departments in Meriden, Wallingford and Southington, \$1.18 per person. Cities and towns with part-time health directors, such as Durham and Middlefield, receive 49 cents per person. Municipalities that are part of regional health districts also receive funding. Towns with a population of 5,000 or less get \$2.43 per person, and towns with more than 5,000 people receive \$2.08 per person.

A state budget has not been passed yet for fiscal years 2009-2010 and 2010-2011, but Karen Buckley-Bates, director of government relations for the Department of Public Health, said she expects the per capita reimbursement numbers to be changed - a thought that does not make local public health directors happy.

Appearing at Thursday's meeting was Sen. Leonard Fasano, R-North Haven. The senator, who represents Wallingford, told members of the council that it's important for them to share their thoughts with the governor and lawmakers. If the committee does not submit a proposal, the General Assembly will take matters into their own hands, he said.

The council is scheduled to meet next on Sept. 2 from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Connecticut Hospital Association on Barnes Road. The council's meetings are open to the public.

"We have an ambitious agenda," Buckley-Bates said.

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