

Testimony
House Bill 1012
House Appropriations
Wednesday February 5, 2025
Rolette County Public Health District
Testimony on the Importance of Enhanced State Aid Support
for Local Public Health

Chairperson Nelson and members of House Appropriation committee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony today on the critical importance of state aid support for the Rolette County Public Health District.

My name is Barbara Frydenlund, Administrator and I represent the Rolette County Public Health District, serving the county of Rolette and dedicated to safeguarding the global health and well-being of our county. Rolette County is within District 9.

As with all Public health entities in North Dakota, Rolette County Public Health is fundamental to the well-being of our community. We provide services including immunizations, maternal and child health programs, disease prevention, health education and prevention programs, and emergency preparedness. These services are crucial in promoting public health, preventing outbreaks, and ensuring that all community members have access to preventive health services.

Rolette County continues to be one of the poorest counties within the state and country. Our mill levy value is limited, by our low land values and non-taxable tribal lands and tribal trust lands within our county. Despite the federal designation of tribal lands in Rolette County, federal impact aid in lieu of tax base from tribal lands is not available to public health services. This is in sharp contrast to federal impact aid allocated to school districts within our service area. Though this is an important part of public-school finances we do have to be cognizant of the fact that children must be healthy to learn effectively. Current state aid does not factor in the poverty rate and health status of our population. The greater poverty the greater the health needs.

Currently Rolette County state aid payment accounts for three (3%) percent (\$57,000.00) of our annual budget. As per the North Dakota Century Code, the max levy of local tax dollars that may be allocated to local public health is five mills and for us that equates to approximately \$117,000.00. With currently no additional local dollars available to our agency, the importance of state aid is monumental. For reference thirty-three (33%) of our revenue is generated through fee for service. Currently fifty-one (51%) of our revenue is received through federal to state passthrough grants. These grants are decreasing in availability. Again, for your reference our current immunization grant funding is \$4800.00 per year, Emergency preparedness funding \$3704.00 per year, Maternal Child Health funding is \$17,500.00 with a required match of \$13,125.00. From the above description you can see why supplemental funding such as state aid is essential to the viability of Rolette County Public Health.

State aid and local tax dollars are the only flexible funding available to local public health to address grant funding match, local community health priorities and foundational public health services. These two sources also supplement programs including programs such as North Dakota health tracks and immunizations, in which state reimbursement does not equate with the costs of delivery of these essential services. For us, these funds are extremely limited and pose a barrier to providing local services and having adequate match for grants.

Our public health workforce has decreased due to lack of available funding and additional cuts are inevitable due to decreased federal and state funding, increasing cost of supplies, the increased cost of living, the ever-increasing health insurance costs. Our public health nursing salaries are non-competitive compared to other agencies.

In addition to the above fiscal description, as all local public health offices do, our public health district acts as a gap filler in the community. We find ourselves spending more time providing case management for families, connecting people to services within or outside of the area, providing educational services that do not have a funding source. Some of these services include chronic disease services, school health services, mental health first aid, CPR, fluoride varnish applications, car seat programs, babysitting programs, breast pump loaner program, breast feeding support and policy development, clinical care such as dressing changes, injections, sexual disease testing, just to name a few. Without additional local public health funding these services simply cannot continue.

As I reference health services provided by Rolette County Public Health, the Medicaid Health Tracks program is critical to the health of Medicaid eligible children. This program is a federal program that each state is to implement with the goal of identifying potential physical, and developmental health concerns prior to the conditions manifesting into serious or debilitating and costly health issues. Children receive a head-to-toe assessment by a Registered Nurse and referred to additional health services as deemed necessary or requested by the parent/guardian or the client themselves.

We assumed this program in 2005 and for the next ten years we received staff support from Rolette County Social Services and a regional health tracks coordinator who was a ND Human Services employee. The support from social services ended in 2015, but due to the importance of this program we maintained it independently. Program costs were greater than revenue obtained from ND Medicaid, and we supplemented the program with state aid funding.

Beginning in 2016, up to \$63,901.00 in "Program Administration" reimbursement was available to Rolette County Public Health instead of to Rolette County Social Services. In 2016 we had assumed the entire program including the full administration as well as the actual screenings. The administrative funding and the assistance of the regional health tracks coordinator facilitated a breakeven Health Tracks budget. In June of 2022, the then Executive Director of ND Human Services ended the Health Tracks Administration funding, citing in written form that North Dakota was revamping the Health Tracks Program, and the current funding would end in June 2022. He cited that we were the only public health district receiving this funding and that it was simply not fair. Further discussion was a moot point. During this period other health districts who were offering Health Tracks continued to receive health tracks administrative assistance from their local social services. Since 2022 this program has not been fiscally solvent

but deemed essential for our population. Since 2005, we have 600-900 children participate annually in this program. I say it is essential due to the number of children who lack a medical home, the families that need support beyond a 15-minute primary care appointment and the significant health concerns identified. Over the years we have identified children who are deaf, markedly decreased vision, malformed heads, skull fracture, orthopedic concerns, sexual and physical abuse, suicidal ideology, malnourishment, obesity, dangerously high blood lead levels, diabetes, hypertension, massive dental needs, chronic school absenteeism, growth and development delays just to name a few. All of which no one cannot put a price on. The amount of case management that families are needing continues to escalate, the amount of time assisting families to find a dentist, orthodontist, or mental health service is monumental due to the lack of providers accepting Medicaid clients all of which consumes more staff time and increasing program costs.

The saving grace for the 2024-2025 Health Tracks Program is the Statewide Strategies Grant that we received during the fall of 2024. This funding is one time funding that appropriated by the 2023 legislature and was a competitive grant with a June 2025 end date. I urge you to please consider again allocating such funding. The funding was distributed across the state and included grantees other than local public health. The grant did have a 100% match.

Immunization is one of the most effective public health interventions. It prevents the spread of infectious diseases and protects vulnerable populations. State aid support enables Rolette County Public Health District to procure vaccines and run immunization clinics, ensuring high vaccination coverage and herd immunity.

Maternal and child health programs are vital for reducing infant and maternal mortality rates. State Aid funding helps to ensure that these essential services are accessible to all mothers and children in the county, regardless of their socio-economic status.

Preventing diseases before they occur is more cost-effective than treating them after they have manifested. Rolette County Public Health District runs various health education programs, including those focused on chronic disease management, nutrition, and physical activity. State aid support facilitates these educational campaigns, helping to reduce the incidence of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

We know extremely well that in times of crisis, such as natural disasters or pandemics, local public health districts are on the front lines of response. Adequate state aid can ensure that Rolette County Public Health District is well-prepared with emergency plans, supplies, and trained personnel to manage such situations efficiently and effectively.

State aid support is a lifeline for public health districts. It ensures that they have the financial resources necessary to maintain and/or expand their services. For Rolette County Public Health District, increased state aid means:

1. Ensuring a competent workforce
2. Delivering effective public health strategies to engage the community in prevention programming
3. Addressing the health disparities that exist within our community, ensuring that everyone has the equal opportunity to achieve optimal health.

Without an increase in state aid funding, Rolette County Public Health District would face significant challenges:

1. A lack of funding would force the district to cut back on services, leaving community members without essential healthcare. Immunization rates could drop, disease outbreaks could rise, and maternal and child health programs could suffer.
2. Health inequities could widen as vulnerable populations lose access to critical services. This would exacerbate existing disparities and lead to poorer health outcomes for the community.
3. Without preventive services, more people would rely on emergency care for conditions that could have been managed or prevented. This would strain the healthcare system and increase costs for both individuals and the state.
4. State aid support is crucial for the sustainability and effectiveness of Rolette County Public Health District. It enables the district to provide comprehensive, high-quality care to all community members, regardless of their circumstances.

Investing in public health through state aid not only improves individual health outcomes but also strengthens the entire community, leading to a thriving and healthier future for all.

The importance of state aid support cannot be overstated. It is the backbone of public health infrastructure, ensuring that districts like Rolette County Public Health can continue to serve their communities effectively.

By securing and enhancing state aid support, we invest in a healthier, more resilient future for everyone.

Thank you for your time and consideration of allocating an additional \$2,000,000.00 for local public health state aid to the NDHHS for the 2025-2027 biennium.

Sincerely,
Barbara Frydenlund, RN
Administrator
Rolette County Public Health District
bfrydenlund@nd.gov