

March 21, 2020

A Delaware County Health Department – A Dream to Come True

To the Editor,

After reading the *Swarthmorean* article, “Incoming Delco Council Engages Community as Resource,” there are new developments regarding the public health department in Delaware County. We applaud the efforts of the new County Council to form a modern, locally-based, nimble health department that will respond to a variety of threats to public health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given Delaware County a new sense of urgency. According to a March 19th press release, an intergovernmental cooperation agreement was entered into with Chester and Delaware Counties to coordinate “medical advice and medical needs, investigation and contact tracing of positive cases, communication to healthcare providers and first responders, and, most importantly communication to citizens”. This partnership was established to *only* address coronavirus. Delaware County has been functioning for several decades without a county public health department and was not organized to respond to this outbreak.

In recent years, public health needs of Delaware County have been handled by a patchwork of organizations, with DELCO Department of Inter-Community Health providing resource and referral service. The ultimate authority rests with the Pennsylvania Department of Health that maintains a small satellite office in the City of Chester. The agencies addressing public health matters have been and continue to be vastly underfunded and under-resourced to meet the needs of a densely populated area of over a half-million people. In hindsight, the lack of a public health department at the county level appears short-sighted in light of the current pandemic that has paralyzed much of the world.

Public health services are typically delivered with funding from federal, state and local levels in concert with private partnerships. Act 315, Pennsylvania’s local health administration law, provides block grants to public health departments. Federal funding for unmet needs is available in maternal health, childhood nutrition, smoking cessation, and addiction treatment. However, these funds are available only to municipalities with sufficient public health administrative and human resource capacity.

Without a county public health department, State officials are managing this crisis 100 miles away in Harrisburg. Local authorities are often not informed about details regarding infected individuals. Such lack of information potentially impedes both emergency responses and efforts to control the spread throughout the county.

As early as the fall of 2019, the Council Commissioners have been working closely with community stakeholders and the League of Women to Voters who have been advocating for a Delaware County Health Department for decades. With the efforts of the current Council, we are hopeful that within 18 to 24 months, the people of Delaware County will have their own professionally staffed health department to address any future crisis. We encourage you to support the County’s work to put a public health department in place to help this dream become reality.

Sincerely,

Olivia Thorne, President of Delaware County LWV Interleague Organization, Barbara Amstutz, President League of Women Voters of Central Delaware County, and Roberta Winters, President, League of Women Voters of Radnor Township.