

## **Gazette Opinion: Lots in name for county public health**

**By The Gazette Staff**

Every senior citizen who received a flu shot at clinics held in Billings or Laurel senior centers has been served by the Yellowstone City-County Health Department. Every person who's had a meal at one the 1,000 or so food service establishments in Yellowstone County has benefited from department inspections. When norovirus, West Nile virus and hantavirus sickened local citizens, infection-control professionals from the department were the community's front-line defense to track down the source of disease and prevent its spread. The department provides school nurses, dentistry for indigent individuals and nutrition programs for women infants and children.

The Montana Family Medicine Residency is part of the Yellowstone City-County Health Department. So are Big Sky Hospice and the Deering Community Health Center, a primary care clinic that serves all clients on a sliding fee basis and draws mostly patients who have no insurance. The department recently opened primary-care clinics in Joliet, Bridger and Worden. The department serves people across Montana by administering federally funded statewide programs for Healthcare for the Homeless and HIV treatment.

### **County levy support**

In November 2002, voters approved a levy increase for the Yellowstone City-County Health Department. Most of the department's \$30 million annual budget comes from various federal health contracts; some comes from fees for service. About 6 percent is supplied by the \$1.8 million the county health levy provides.

The long moniker - Yellowstone City-County Health Department - doesn't roll off the tongue quickly, and according to the department's marketing research, it doesn't stick in people's minds either. Clunky as it may be, the name says what the department is: public health.

Public health is the best health investment a community makes. It delivers the biggest bang for the buck. By promoting smoke-free workplaces, suicide prevention, partnering with local disaster and hospital authorities to prepare for fires, floods, hazardous materials releases and other calamities, the department and its 300 employees make Yellowstone County a safer, healthier place to live. The department also plays a key role cementing partnerships between Billings Clinic and St. Vincent Healthcare. The Medication Assistance Program and the Community Crisis Center (which also involves the Mental Health Center) may not have been possible without the participation of the health department.

### **RiverStone Health**

Trying to summarize all the department does is no easy task. After two years of research, department leadership has settled on RiverStone Health. Starting today, the department will be doing business as RiverStone Health.

Executive Director Lil Anderson said the department will maintain "the same commitment to quality and services." She cited the "stigma of county government or any government" as one reason for choosing a name that doesn't hint at public health.

The organization's new mission is "to improve life, health and safety." That is the core of its service array, which nobody else provides. If the new name makes people more aware of these vital, varied services, it will be a good change.

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