

Is health an essential service?

The current debate within our city government over the necessity of our Health Department brings out the question of what are essential government services. Recognizing that the future of our society, both economic and philosophic, is being formed we must not stand idle as decisions are reached.

I was born at the dawn of the space age. When the soviets announced the launching of Sputnik in October of 1957 America found itself behind. Our scientific programs and educational system had gone into decline over the years following World War II. As we listened to the steady “beep, beep, beep” of the Russian spacecraft we were forced to acknowledge that we had fallen behind. We had failed to see the value of investing in our future.

That next year the United State’s Congress passed into law the National Defense Education Act of 1958 which greatly increased funding for education in the sciences at all levels. America defined education as an “essential service” of government that served the good of our country.

Across America today we are again faced with dire world circumstances. Faced with a shaky world marketplace we hear the call of those who would define our country based only on the “needs of the one” where selfish interests trample our sense of Christian compassion and national unity.

The current proposal by the Lubbock City Council is to gut services from the Health Department because of a 15% decrease in federal and state funding for those services. The building located at 19th and Texas Ave will be closed and personnel reassigned or just simply terminated. Lubbock will become the largest city in the United States to not have a functioning Health Department...all at a time when our community holds infamous title to leading the country in teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and mortality associated with lack of health insurance and access to care.

Bridget Faulkenberry, the current health director for the Health Department, stated that services will be shifted to other community agencies and that the consumer of those services will likely experience an increase in costs. A request for proposals for these and other services has already been announced and file cabinets and personnel have already been relocated out of the building before any public debate has been allowed for.

Vital statistics will be relocated to City Hall. Laboratory services will be housed largely in the water department. The Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) Clinic and Immunizations will be moved to other community agencies such as Community Center of Lubbock or the Larry Combest Clinic. Although Planned Parenthood has submitted a proposal for the STD services but has received no support from council on their behalf.

The transfer of immunization services outside of the Health Department is the clearest example of the misguided efforts of the city to save money. Research has consistently shown that cost to the consumer is a direct barrier to seeking those services. Raising the cost to obtain immunizations for a child will mean that fewer children in Lubbock are immunized. While the city will save a little over \$100,000 by closing this clinic at the Health Department the savings will likely vaporize as children who

failed to get immunized arrive at the Emergency Room at University Medical Center and are hospitalized at great expense to treat what is a preventable condition.

The individual who becomes infected with a sexually transmitted disease such as HIV or Syphilis is likely to delay or avoid treatment due to the additional cost of care. These individuals will move through our community increasing infection rates and stealing the future of our young people. The expense of treating the expanded disease will increase the cost so that whatever savings that were anticipated will be flushed away.

City leaders maintain that “no one will be turned away” for services if they are unable to pay. The reality of this benevolence can be seen in the mountains of paperwork and delay in order to obtain services such as the UMC “Blue card” or to qualify for services at local community agencies that require multiple documents and reviews. Faced with the degree of difficulty of obtaining services (as compared to the existing Health Department services) one can anticipate that individuals and families will simply go without.

Some have suggested that this action by the city council is based not so much on cost-savings as a desire to rid themselves of the need to provide for the citizens of Lubbock. A second grouping of opinion is the desire of the council to silence members of the Board of Health who have attempted to promote for the health of all of our citizens by establishing a dialogue that actually seeks solutions to such problems as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and infant mortality.

The citizens of Lubbock should be made aware that the proposed reduction in services by the Health Department will not save money, and will actually increase costs that will be passed on to the property tax payer under the category of the Lubbock County Hospital District. As illness goes untreated the care will be sought at the last through the County Hospital with unreimbursed costs being passed on to the taxpayer. While our governor praises himself for cutting the Medicaid rolls those costs are now established and paid for at the local level.

Healthcare is an essential service in our democracy. Those who would terminate or reduce health services are leading our city into decline as we steal the future of our children by crippling them in their earliest years. This proposed action of our city leadership will move our community from being included in the “Bum Steer” awards of Texas Monthly magazine to the columns detailing the death and disability of our family and friends.

Just as after the launch of Sputnik we must not allow a further decline in the health of our country. Our city leaders need to understand that the monies they save will be stained with the destruction of our own people.