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YOUR VIEW

Lehigh Valley bureau would be an investment in good health

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A recent commentary in The Morning Call highlighted significant community benefits and services projected to result from the proposed Lehigh Valley Department of Health. A concept jointly established by Northampton County Council and the Lehigh County commissioners, this board would be the first regional health department in Pennsylvania, and one of only a few in the United States. Hospitals in the Lehigh Valley already provide extensive community outreach services, prompting some to question why we need a regional public health system that would be funded by the taxpayers. advertisement

St. Luke's Hospital & Health Network, as an example, annually infuses more than \$4 million into various community health programs, often in partnership with our municipal health departments and other local agencies. The Bethlehem Partnership for a Healthy Community, established by the St. Luke's Board of Trustees in 1996, is a national role model of a collaborative initiative of more than 130 participating agencies representing local business, government, education and community organizations. The partnership's mission is to improve the health status and quality of life of our community. Their remarkable, most recent accomplishments include:

- An extensive adolescent mobile health program, which has increased access to care and medications, and reduced smoking rates among local teens.
- A dental health initiative, which provides preventive and restorative care to thousands of children each year who are not otherwise able to access dental care.
- A vision program, which has increased the percentage of children in the Bethlehem Area School District who are able to get the eye exams and glasses they need from less than 10 percent to nearly 50 percent.

While St. Luke's is proud of these impressive achievements, we recognize hospitals primarily focus on treatment care, while public health offers an emphasis on preventive care. Investing in our community, in a meaningful, public health endeavor, is the right thing to do.

Ultimately, it will not only save lives and improve the quality of life, but it will also reduce the need for community resources generally funded through tax increases. Despite the best efforts of all area hospitals, and the city health departments, a multitude of unmet, regional public health needs — many preventable — are not being addressed. These include teen pregnancy rates, short- and long-term consequences of low birth weights, the recent surge in adolescent suicide, and fall prevention for older adults.

Without the organized prevention services that public health provides, the burden of illness and disability will outgrow our ability to effectively care for our population and will further drive up health care costs for all of us, especially local businesses that bear the brunt of insurance premiums. Expenses spawned by child abuse and neglect, substance abuse and mental health treatment, nursing home care for the elderly, and prison are

growing at alarming rates. The result? Higher and higher taxes and health care premiums from which there is no foreseeable relief in the absence of substantive, coordinated public health efforts.

What changes to this dismal scenario for our children and older adults can we expect with the establishment of the Lehigh Valley Board of Health? Research validates a low birth-weight prevention program will ultimately decrease the need for school support services, referrals to child abuse and neglect, and eventually prison and probation rates. Evaluations of evidenced-based maternal and child health home visiting programs, such as the widely recognized nurse-family partnership model, have demonstrated an overall savings to health and human services programs of up to \$17,200 for every youth served. Public health programs have been found to be particularly cost-effective in reducing expenses for the juvenile justice system. If we invest in keeping infants and young children healthy and safe, we achieve marked savings in treating and rehabilitating juvenile offenders. Studies have shown a nearly 40 percent reduction in falls among older adults when prevention programs are implemented, reducing the need for costly local long-term rehabilitation or nursing home care.

St. Luke's is proud of its long-standing commitment to community health outreach and will continue to offer these services. Hospitals are, and must remain, key partners in any public health endeavor. Hospitals often treat the consequences of substandard public health services, and this is business we would happily see disappear in exchange for a healthier community. The challenge to create a healthier community is great and requires commitment and involvement by our hospitals and by a regional health department. This is important work and it must be done outside the political arena and in a cost-effective manner that limits its impact on taxpayers.

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