

Hospital District passes 'critical' employee-retention bonus to address staff shortages

By Robert Galbreath
rgalbreath@pinedaleroundup.com

MARBLETON – COVID-19 intensified a nationwide shortage in health-care workers, and Sublette County is no exception.

The scarcity in qualified employees is particularly acute in nursing. The Sublette County Hospital District is operating with only four nurses to cover two clinics and be on call 24/7 for emergencies, Dave Doorn, administrative director, told the board of trustees on Oct. 20.

The additional workload in the midst of a pandemic is taking a toll on the nurses and other staff, Doorn said. A retention bonus was "critical at this time" to keep existing staff in Sublette County, he added.

Doorn proposed a two-part bonus, with \$1,500 per employee paid immediately followed by \$1,000 in six months. The total cost for both payments, before taxes, came to \$158,000.

Board chairwoman Tonia Hoffman stated the hospital district was in a tight spot financially, but the clinics could not afford to lose additional staff.

Hoffman told the Roundup the bonus was one step the district could take to demonstrate to "all employees how appreciated they are" during the pandemic.

"We definitely want them to be recognized and have an incentive to stay here," she added.

Kari DeWitt, public relations director, said the district could pursue a grant from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration to reimburse part or all of the retention bonus cost.

Trustees unanimously passed a motion to approve the retention bonuses as presented by Doorn.

Bill Kluck, EMS director, encouraged the board to include a personal letter to accompany the bonuses recognizing the sacrifices and hardships district employees experienced. The board agreed that Kluck's suggestion was an "excellent idea."

Getting creative

The trustees and district staff discussed additional measures to alleviate the staff shortage. Doorn told trustees the district hired a new medical assistant last week and interviewed two nurses.

The district worked with a company called Locums to take on two temporary physician assistants from Cheyenne, Doorn added.

Trustee Jamison Ziegler asked what measures the district was taking to recruit nurses. District managers had boosted nationwide ads to hit specific markets in Wyoming and across the nation, Doorn responded.

In the meantime, the district implemented a plan to use paramedics as substitutes for nurses on an on-call basis, Doorn said.

Paramedics in Sublette County already worked well with nurses and providers in the ER, Doorn added, and it is within regulations.

The district executed the plan last week, with the first shift of on-call paramedics on Wednesday night, Doorn said.

"We think this can be a great way to give our nurses a break," Doorn told the Roundup.

USDA, merger and Public Health building updates

Doorn reported the district is "waiting patiently" for its loan application through the U.S. Department of Agriculture to go before the national loan committee. The district is completing final details required at the state level and continues to "wait for direction or information" from the USDA, Doorn added.

Attorneys for the Sublette Center and hospital district are working to finalize the merger agreement, Hoffman told trustees. The process was moving forward, but was also pending USDA approval.

Trustees unanimously passed a motion to approve a delegation agreement with Sublette County to transfer Public Health to a new site on South Tyler Street, pending discussions with Public Health.

Hoffman confirmed to the Examiner that relocating Public Health would not take place

until the hospital district received approval on its loan application from the USDA.

Hoffman added that she and the district's attorney, Abbi Forwood, planned to reach out to Public Health over the following week to discuss the agreement with the county and make sure Public Health is included in the process before the hospital district formally signs the agreement.

Employee health insurance update

The hospital district's new insurance committee, representing both the district and the Sublette Center, received requests for quotes, or RFQs, from four insurance companies offering coverage to employees.

The committee recommended accepting a bid from Tegeler and Associates.

Trustee Dave Bell suggested the board consider all four companies to find a product that also fulfilled the district's fiduciary responsibilities to the taxpayers.

Ziegler stated Sublette County School District No. 1 opened employee insurance up to bid. The school district ended up retaining the local option, but the process was healthy and "freshened" the relationship with their provider,

he added.

Trustees Wendy Boman and Kenda Tanner agreed opening the process was worthwhile to save money.

The board unanimously recommended the insurance committee seek requests for proposals from all four companies and include the Sublette Center in the process.

Additional Hospital District news

- The district received a \$226,000 check from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for COVID-19 relief. DeWitt told the Roundup the funds will reimburse costs incurred by the pandemic between March 2020 and March 2021.

- Trustees passed a unanimous motion to transfer \$300,000 from district reserves pending the receipt of tax revenue from the county. If the tax revenue arrives in early November, the district will void the motion and leave the money in reserves, Hoffman explained to the Roundup.

The trustees did not take making the decision to move additional funds from reserves lightly, Hoffman stated. She added the district still had plenty of reserves left, worth approximately \$6 million.

Legislature advances 10 bills to start special session

By Hannah Black
and Jasmine Hall
Wyoming Tribune Eagle

CHEYENNE — The special session called to push back against the Biden administration's vaccine mandate was supported Tuesday morning by both chambers of the Wyoming Legislature, which together advanced 10 bills for committee review.

Neither the House nor the Senate voted to approve special session rules, however, which would have allowed identical bills to be introduced in both bodies as a time-saving measure during a planned three-day session.

The House voted, 20 to 37, against these rules, as did the Senate by a vote of 11 to 18. Representatives from both bodies shared concerns the special session rules might encourage a rushed process, with little opportunity for debate or public input. This led to the approval and application of rules from the general session earlier this year, with minor rule amendments considered by the House and Senate.

That means the special session could last up to 20 days, although some speculated 10 days was more realistic.

"If it's important enough for us to assemble here," said Senate Minority Floor Leader Chris Rothfuss, D-Laramie, "it's important enough for us to do it right."

Still, neither body voted to adjourn immediately, which would have required a majority vote of present members. The House voted, 21 to 35 against, and the Senate voted, 6 to 23.

Rep. Chuck Gray, R-Casper, was among those who urged his fellow representatives to vote for the special session rules and against adjournment. He called this "a critical moment in the history of our republic," with the possibility of hundreds or thousands of people in the state losing their jobs as a result of the mandate.

Others argued for immediate adjournment, including Rep. Mike Yin, D-Jackson.

He said places like his district, which depend on tourism, would suffer if the state were to tell businesses it could not require COVID-19 vaccinations or other safety measures.

Because state statute does not overrule federal law, it's unclear what effect any of the bills passed during the special session would have.

The Biden administration also has yet to present final details of the mandate, meaning legislators do not yet have a full understanding of the edict.

House Speaker Eric Barlow, R-Gillette, introduced just six of the 20 bills received in the House of Representatives, after he announced his intention to introduce only bills specific to the mandate.

Barlow said he believed these six bills cover the key themes legislators want to address

during the special session. If the body had disagreed, it could have overruled him, he said.

Barlow assigned House Bill 1002, which attempts to prohibit the enforcement of a federal vaccine mandate and authorizes legal action to fight the mandate, to the Judiciary Committee. The Minerals, Business and Economic Development Committee received HB 1001, 1005 and 1009.

The Labor, Health and Social Services Committee received HB 1006 and 1013. HB 1006 would require health-care facilities, governmental entities and essential service providers to make reasonable accommodations to people unable or unwilling to prove their vaccination status.

It also would create a personal exemption for any vaccine required of a school-aged child and says that requiring a vaccine as a condition of employment is discriminatory or unfair.

As part of a House-specific rule for the session approved, 49-8, all bills requiring considerations for appropriations were assigned to the House Appropriations Committee, along with another committee.

House bills 1001, 1002 and 1009 were discussed during Tuesday's Appropriations meeting, with all three recommended to pass.

The Senate diverged from the House in its introductions of bills to the floor, as well as its recommendations for further discussion in committees.

While 11 bills were received in the Senate for introduction, another five failed to make it past the floor and four were recommended to the appropriate committees.

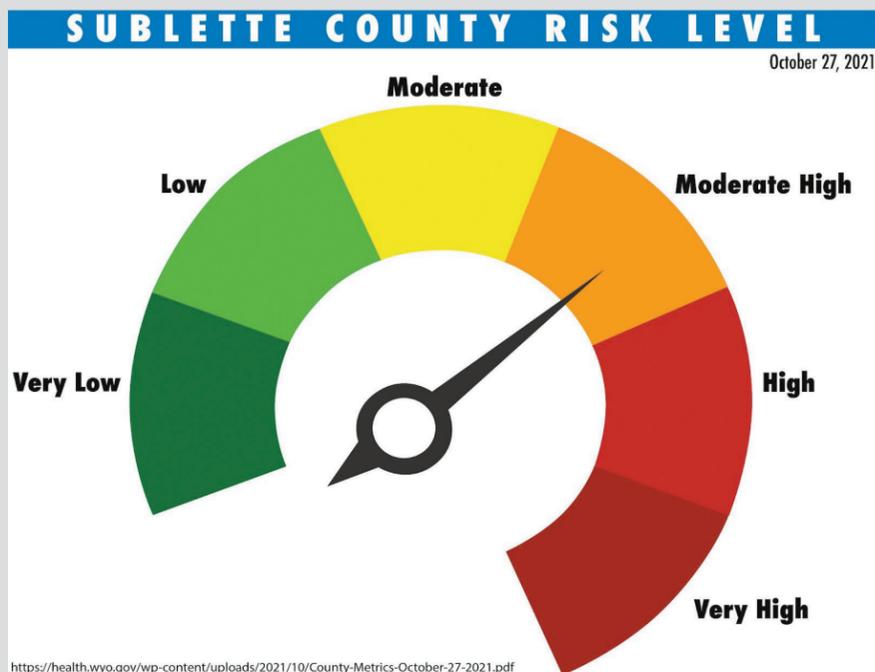
After considerable debate, only four bills were introduced and approved by the body and assigned to Senate committees, which met Tuesday afternoon.

The Senate Appropriations Committee received SF 1003, which addressed discrimination toward unvaccinated individuals in health care, education and other sectors of public life. It provided criminal penalties and authorized civil remedies regarding these issues.

The committee also received the only bill not related to topics brought on by the pandemic. SF 1019 related to a Wyoming gaming commission-scrivener error correction.

The final bill the Senate approved for introduction and discussion within a committee was SF 1009, which was received by the Labor, Health and Social Services Committee. The bill shared similar characteristics to both SF 1003 and SF 1004, with concentrations on vaccination requirements.

Although these were the only four pieces of legislation brought to Senate committees Tuesday, the other 11 bills received for introduction may have an opportunity to move forward. This will be at the discretion of Wyoming Senate leadership.



Another county resident dies from COVID

By Brady Oltmans
boltmans@pinedaleroundup.com

SUBLETTE COUNTY – Another Sublette County resident died from COVID-19 this week, sending the county's death toll up to 16 since the start of the pandemic. That number has grown at an accelerated rate over the past month with the spread of the Delta variant.

Sublette County Public Health confirmed this in its latest briefing on Thursday, Oct. 28. In that update, the Wyoming Department of Health confirmed 23 new cases of the novel coronavirus in the past week, and Public Health confirmed 16 active cases.

The county remained in the orange, or moderate-high transmission zone for community spread this week to reflect a lowered amount of active cases. The majority of Wyoming remained in the red "high" transmission range.

Following vaccine clinics, now 3,024 people have been fully vaccinated in Sublette County. That is 30.76 percent of the population. In addition to full vaccinations, Public Health administered 470 booster doses this past week. Those shots are continually offered in the county and sign-up can be completed by calling Public Health at 307-367-2157 to schedule an appointment.

Vaccine clinics are being conducted at the Sublette County Fairgrounds on Tuesday, Nov. 2, from 1 to 4:30 p.m., the Public Health Office at the Marbleton Senior Center on Tuesdays from 1 to 4 p.m., although it will be closed on Nov. 2 so staff can hold the drive-up clinic at the fairgrounds. The drive-up vaccinations are also held in Pinedale at the Museum of the Mountain Man from 1 to 4 p.m. on Thursdays. It will be closed on Veteran's Day and Thanksgiving.