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Kent County Commissioners Approve Hiring Two Experts to Respond to Emerging Public Health Concerns

GRAND RAPIDS – The Kent County Board of Commissioners voted this morning to approve the addition of two full-time Public Health Epidemiologist positions in the Health Department; one to assist with per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), vapor intrusion and other environmental issues, and the other to address the opioid epidemic.

In 2017, the Health Department became aware of an investigation by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) regarding contaminated groundwater in the Belmont area. Water in a number of homes in that area is contaminated with PFAS. “The staff at the Health Department have been on the front lines of informing and educating residents regarding test results, the known health consequences of PFAS, and ways to limit exposure,” said Jim Saalfeld, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. “As more areas of contamination are discovered, it is clear we need to adjust staffing levels to meet the needs of our residents.”

The person hired for this Epidemiologist position will be expected to provide subject matter expertise, conduct health surveillance, coordinate specimen collection, exercise legal authorities when applicable under direction of the Health Officer, communicate with residents and health providers, and be the primary intermediary with other agencies. In addition to PFAS, this role is also necessary to assist in the investigation and response of other environmental public health threats such as vapor intrusion.

The second position will provide leadership and administration of the Kent County Opioid Task Force (KCOTF). This Task Force convened three years ago under the coordination of the Red Project. “In Kent County, the rate of overdose deaths has increased four-fold since 2000, with 70 opioid related deaths and over 680 opioid overdose-related Emergency Department visits in 2016,” said Adam London, Administrative Health Officer for Kent County. “In 2017, Kent County reported 93 opioid-related deaths with an average age of 39 years old, and we still are awaiting toxicology reports on a number of suspicious deaths. The staff of the Health Department are in a unique position to provide leadership in efforts to address education, prevention and access to recovery services.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently called the opioid issue “the largest man-made epidemic in the history of the world.”

The cost of both full-time positions will be funded by General Funds previously appropriated to the 2017-18 Health Fund budget for Emerging Issues. The Board is continuing to work with State lawmakers to make additional funding for these issues a priority in the 2019 Michigan budget.

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