



Newsletter

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Click on the Events Calendar for up-to-date information on committee meetings.

Committee Requests Mental Health, Prescription Drug Bill Drafts

The Children, Families, Health, and Human Services Interim Committee asked in May that several bills be drafted to increase community-based mental health crisis services and to tackle the problem of prescription drug abuse from different angles.

The action came as the committee continued work on its House Joint Resolution 16 study of state-operated institutions and the Senate Joint Resolution 20 study of prescription drug abuse.

Community Crisis Services

As part of the HJR 16 study, the committee heard about the potential costs of several ideas for providing mental health services in the community rather than in state institutions. Members then asked that four bills be drafted for review and public comment at their June meeting.

The bill drafts would:

- appropriate \$1 million over the biennium to increase the amount of money available for grants to counties that develop crisis intervention and jail diversion services. The grant program was first created by House Bill 130 in 2009.
- appropriate \$1.2 million over the biennium to pay for more short-term, secure detention options for people who may be in need of involuntary commitment. HB 131 in 2009 allowed the Department of Public Health and Human Services to contract for secure beds in the community as an alternative to transporting people to the Montana State Hospital in Warm Springs.
- appropriate about \$345,000 a year to hire five more DPHHS employees to work with developmentally disabled individuals who are in or approaching a mental health crisis. The employees would travel to a person's community to work with the individual, family, and DD provider to try to keep the person in the community.
- appropriate funds to encourage facilities to treat someone for up to 14 days if the person agrees to undergo voluntary treatment while an involuntary commitment petition is suspended. This diversion process was created by HB 132 in 2009 but never funded. The com-

mittee agreed to put a \$1 million appropriation in the bill but asked staff to research the potential costs. Members noted the amount may change as the committee reviews the bill more closely.

The committee asked for the bills after reviewing research on the use of HB 130 and HB 131 funds to date and hearing about the potential costs of building and operating a 16-bed mental health treatment facility for people who are involuntarily committed for treatment.

They also asked for information about the potential costs of creating a pre-release center or group home for individuals who have been committed to DPHHS after being convicted of a crime and being found to have been mentally ill at the time the crime was committed. The information will be presented in June.

Also as part of the study, committee members heard from Glendive Medical Center officials about the mental health treatment they are able to provide to people in eastern Montana. In addition, Dan Aune of Mental Health America of Montana discussed strategic planning for behavioral health needs. And Adrienne Slaughter of the Department of Corrections and Rep. Casey Schreiner discussed the work of the Montana Re-Entry Initiative Task Force. Schreiner is a member of both the interim committee and the task force.

Targeting Prescription Drug Abuse

Committee members continued to gather information on the SJR 20 study, with presentations from the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics, the Montana Medical Association, and the Montana Prescription Drug Registry.

Don Vogt of Oklahoma discussed the steps that state has taken to try to reduce misuse and abuse of prescription narcotics -- including requiring pharmacies to report to the state prescription drug registry within five minutes of filling a prescription for a controlled substance. He said the change has increased use of the registry substantially because providers know the information is up to date.

Four physicians discussed proposals the medical association has developed to reduce prescription drug abuse. The group is calling for better education for health care providers and patients about the risks of narcotic painkillers; statutory and regulatory changes to allow health care providers to report suspected "doctor shopping" and to make improvements to the Montana Prescription Drug Registry; and development of a public awareness campaign.

Marcie Bough of the Montana Board of Pharmacy and Becki Kolenberg of Montana Interactive provided more information about the operation of the Montana Prescription Drug Registry. They discussed the initial development of the registry and the timeline for making planned improvements.

The changes will allow a health care provider's staff members to check the registry for the provider and will allow registry users to review data from other states.

Based on the presentations, the committee asked for:

- a bill draft to allow health care providers to share information with law enforcement when they suspect a person is seeing multiple providers in an effort to obtain drugs;
- a bill draft to allow providers to send prescriptions to a pharmacy electronically;
- a comparison of the laws establishing the Montana and Oklahoma prescription drug registries; and
- research on the options for expanding the number of "drop boxes" where people may safely dispose of unused prescription drugs.

Members discussed, but did not act on, the idea of requiring pharmacies to report information to the prescription drug registry more quickly. Pharmacies currently must file reports on at least a weekly basis. Many stakeholders said that more frequent reporting tends to increase use of the registry by health care providers. Some committee members were interested in moving toward reporting on a 24-hour basis. However, they agreed to seek that change through the administrative rule process rather than by creating a requirement in law.

The committee took no action on a bill draft that would require certain health care licensing boards to establish rules for managing chronic, noncancer pain that is treated by opioid drugs. Members agreed to seek more public comment on the draft before taking further action.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on June 25 in Room 102 of the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Sue O'Connell, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/cfhhs

Committee Staff: soconnell@mt.gov or 406-444-3597

EAIC Wraps up Review of Licensing Boards, Continues Work Comp Tasks

The Economic Affairs Committee in May brought to a close a four-year, two-interim review of occupational and professional licensing boards by determining that all boards that had not yet been before the committee individually had been sufficiently reviewed on paper and through surveys and should remain in existence.

However, the committee also asked the Department of Labor and Industry to provide suggestions at the July 14-15 EAIC meeting for how to resolve financial troubles facing the athletics (boxing) program and the following boards: Funeral Services, Private Alternative Adolescent Residential and Outdoor Programs, and Hearing Aid Dispensers. Possible options for these boards include transferring oversight to other departments and removing the board structure but retaining licensing. The Department of Labor and Industry, to which licensing boards are administratively attached, already has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Justice to address consumer complaints over hearing aids, although disciplinary action for hearing aid dispensers remains with their board.

The department also has proposed to the committee that boards either be reclassified as enterprise funds or that the department be allowed contingency appropriation authority so that the department does not have to borrow appropriation authority from other boards or bureaus when a board faces unexpected financial obligations, such as legal fees from an increased number of complaints. Appropriation authority is the limit that the Legislature sets on the amount of money an agency may spend. The authority is separate from board revenues, and boards still would have to cover the actual higher expenses through their fees. The committee will receive more information on this subject at the July meeting.

Work Comp Bill Requested

In other business, the committee directed staff to work on a bill draft for discussion purposes that would put Montana State Fund, the state's largest provider of workers' compensation coverage, under the authority of Montana's insurance commissioner for rate reviews and regulation. Currently, Montana State Fund operates by statute and under the auspices of its board, with financial checks provided by the legislative auditor.

Three national speakers addressed the committee, in part, on whether revising Montana State Fund's regulatory oversight would increase competition in the workers' compensation market. Benefits, not necessarily regulation, are a main cost driver of premiums, they said, along with Montana's high accident rate and the severity of the injuries that workers sustain. They noted that increasing the number of workers' compensation insurers in the market would not necessarily bring rates down. They said external factors such as the overall economy, which affects invested premiums, and a steady payroll picture can add to higher rate pressures.

At the close of discussion about competition, Bruce Wood of the American Insurance Association told the committee that the most constructive step the Legislature could take would be to "subject the State Fund to the full panoply of

state regulation" because, he said, "there shouldn't be legislative or political involvement in the operations of what is an insurance company."

Other Topics

The committee also heard a report on the cottage food industry. The report contained recommendations to include honey as a raw agricultural product and to provide more consistency across counties in who can sell nonhazardous food products directly to consumers without obtaining a food manufacturing license. In response to a question about whether cottage food producers should be allowed to sell their products over the Internet, a Department of Agriculture representative said those studying the cottage food laws preferred that consumers be able to buy directly so they know where the food is from.

The committee also heard:

- about numerous mergers or buyouts in Montana's banking and credit union industry;
- that the state's insurance commissioner is conducting a survey of insurers to obtain more information about who purchased health insurance on the federal exchange and whether those purchasers had lost their health insurance prior to signing up for coverage on the exchange. The committee asked for a report on the survey at its July meeting.
- that the Insure Montana program continues to maintain a waiting list because of the uncertainty of whether the federal exchange will be offering a small business purchasing option for health insurance. The deputy insurance commissioner noted that Insure Montana policies effective January 2015 are for a full year but that state funding for Insure Montana extends only to June 2015, unless the 2015 Legislature extends funding.
- that the Montana Comprehensive Health Association is no longer issuing policies. The association's plans cover about 3,000 Montanans who prior to 2014 had been denied health insurance coverage because of a pre-existing medical condition or other loss of coverage. Under the federal Affordable Care Act, all insurers are now required to offer policies regardless of a person's pre-existing conditions. The association will not be completely out of business until July 1, 2015, at the earliest, pending receipt of final medical bills and resolution of any appeals over payment decisions.
- that the Department of Labor and Industry has surveyed injured workers to learn if they are being told they can access assistance in getting back to work. Survey responses indicated that awareness of the so-called "return-to-work" program is minimal.

- that some physicians who treat workers' compensation cases are frustrated by a variable payment scale that was intended to provide greater payment as an incentive to some physicians to handle the additional paperwork for treating injured workers while providing lower payment when cases are referred to other doctors. Dr. Phillip Steele of Helena recommended that employers be encouraged either by a carrot or a stick to get injured workers back to work and that the differentiated pay scale be dropped.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next at 10 a.m. on July 14 in Room 137 of the Capitol in Helena. The meeting continues at 8 a. m. on July 15. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Pat Murdo, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/eaic

Committee Staff: pmurdo@mt.gov or 406-444-3594

ELG to Look at Digital Archives, Public Records Bill Drafts

The Education and Local Government Interim Committee will review bill drafts and reports when it meets June 16-17 in Helena.

The Subcommittee on Shared Policy Goals for Education also will meet on June 16 in advance of the full committee meeting.

Scheduled reports include presentations from the State Council on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which was formed following passage of Senate Bill 203 during the 2013 legislative session, and the K-12 Data Task Force, which was created by passage of SB 175 in 2013.

The committee will review bill drafts it requested for: the K-12 school funding study required in 20-9-309, MCA; an appropriation to the Montana Historical Society to develop a plan for a digital archives; and a reorganization of public records laws in Title 2, Chapter 6, MCA. The bill drafts for the digital archives and the public records laws stemmed from the work group that the committee sanctioned to investigate electronic records management as part of the House Joint Resolution 2 study.

The committee will take public comment on the bill drafts before deciding how to proceed with the bills.

The committee also will review any agency-requested legislation for authorization for early drafting and introduction in the 2015 Legislature.

Other agenda items for the two-day meeting include:

- an update from the Board of Public Education;
- presentations on digital learning; and
- a panel discussion on oil and gas development impacts and other local government issues.

The Subcommittee on Shared Policy Goals for Education will continue its efforts on finalizing the document for the Montana University System and will review several proposed additions to the K-20 document.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on June 16-17 in Room 137 of the Capitol in Helena. The Subcommittee on Shared Policy Goals for Education will meet from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. on June 16. The full committee will meet at 1 p.m. on June 16, with the meeting continuing on June 17. For more information on the committee's activities, including the subcommittee and work group, visit the committee's website or contact Pad McCracken, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/elgic

Committee Staff: padmccracken@mt.gov or 406-444-3595

ETIC Supports NorthWestern's Proposal to Buy PPL Dams

During its May meeting in Great Falls, the Energy and Telecommunications Interim Committee unanimously agreed to send the Montana Public Service Commission a letter expressing its support for NorthWestern Energy's proposed acquisition of PPL Montana's hydroelectric facilities in the state.

In discussing the reasons for its support at the May 8-9 meeting, the committee found:

- The acquisition will lead to long-term price stability for electricity customers served by NorthWestern Energy. The proposed acquisition meets the spirit and intent of the 2007 Electric Utility Industry Generation Reintegration Act, which requires that a public utility "provide adequate and reliable electricity supply at the lowest long-term total cost."
- Hydroelectricity is a clean, renewable source of generation with no carbon risk.
- The acquisition will place the dams and associated power plants in the hands of a regulated utility with a significant presence in Montana. That action reduces the risk that future power supplies will be based on market forces and

creates assurances that the electricity will not be exported out of state.

While in Great Falls, committee members visited several energy-related facilities, including Rainbow Dam, and hosted a discussion of NorthWestern Energy's proposed purchase of the facilities. The PSC provided an overview of the process it's following to assess the sale. The Montana Consumer Counsel discussed its analysis that raises concerns that Montana customers could pay more for electricity under the proposed purchase than if NorthWestern acquired it from another source. NorthWestern Energy responded that the dam purchase will provide stability by reducing the company's need to buy power at market prices, which are often volatile.

The committee also visited the Calumet Montana Refinery and the Highwood Generating Station. Calumet Montana Refining Co. produces about 10,000 barrels of various petroleum products per day. A planned expansion is expected to nearly double its production. The Highwood Generating Station, since being built in 2011, has not been economical to operate and has mostly been idle. The 40-megawatt plant was built by Southern Montana Electric Generation and Transmission Cooperative, which filed for bankruptcy. The committee toured the facility and also received an update on the bankruptcy settlement.

The committee wrapped up its time in Great Falls with a tour of the central heating plant at Malmstrom Air Force Base. The plant can operate using either coal or natural gas.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on July 18 at the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Sonja Nowakowski, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/etic

Committee Staff: snowakowski@mt.gov or 406-444-3078

EQC Requests Bill Drafts on Hunting and Fishing Licenses, Historic Properties

The Environmental Quality Council at its May meeting considered changes to hunting and fishing license laws, heard testimony on how other states are evaluating federal land management, and moved ahead with a proposal to streamline the operation of some historic properties.

HB 609: Hunting and Fishing Licenses

After reviewing additional information on projected expenditures and earmarks for the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, the EQC directed staff to draft the statutory language needed to implement a slate of changes to Montana's

hunting and fishing license structure and fees, as proposed by a citizens' advisory council.

Through passage of House Bill 609, the 2013 Legislature requested a study of the state's hunting and fishing license system. The EQC incorporated the advisory council's effort into its work plan.

The advisory council developed its recommendations at the request of the governor and in response to a \$5.75 million annual shortfall that FWP says it's facing to maintain current services and operations in its fish and wildlife management programs. The advisory council's recommendations would provide an estimated \$6.13 million in additional revenue per year, with the extra money set aside for use as contingency funding should a new, unfunded mandate arise, such as management of a species removed from the endangered species list.

The EQC has expressed concern about building contingency funding into the proposal and will review the draft language, particularly the proposed fee changes, at its July meeting before deciding whether to solicit public comment on the bill draft in August.

The advisory council's preliminary recommendations include:

- reducing the time between legislative review of the license structure and prices from approximately 10 years to four years;
- standardizing the pricing of free and discounted hunting and fishing licenses currently offered to youth, seniors, and disabled hunters so that the licenses cost 50 percent of the equivalent full-priced licenses;
- consolidating youth license pricing from three age groups to two;
- raising the age at which seniors are eligible for discounted licenses, from 62 to 67;
- creating a base hunting license of \$10 for residents and \$15 for nonresidents that must be purchased before individual species tags;
- increasing nonresident moose, sheep, mountain goat, and bison license prices from \$750 to \$1,250;
- capping the price of the nonresident B-10 big game combination and B-11 deer combination licenses at \$999 and \$625, respectively;
- repricing the "Come Home to Hunt" (87-2-526, MCA) and "Nonresident Relative of a Resident" (87-2-514, MCA) licenses so that they are both priced at 50 percent of the equivalent full-priced nonresident license. Currently, "Come Home to Hunt" licenses are full priced

and “Nonresident Relative of a Resident” licenses are four times the resident price.

- repricing the nonresident college student big game combination license so that it’s priced at 50 percent of the B-10 nonresident big game combination license;
- increasing fishing licenses for residents from \$5 to \$8 for a two-day license and from \$18 to \$24 for a season license;
- increasing fishing licenses for nonresidents from \$15 to \$26 for a two-day license and from \$60 to \$86 for a season license;
- changing the Fish and Wildlife Commission refund policy for nonresidents who are unsuccessful in the March 15 permit drawing so that FWP may retain only 5 percent of the fee for a returned license, instead of 20 percent; and
- converting the 10-day nonresident fishing license into a 7-day license and charging \$56. The current 10-day license is priced at \$43.50.

FWP held nine public meetings in May to take comment on the proposals. The advisory council meets one more time in Helena, on June 25, to review the feedback received from the public and the EQC.

For more information on the HB 609 study, contact Hope Stockwell, legislative research analyst, at 444-9280 or hstockwell@mt.gov.

SJR 15 Study: Federal Land Management

Legislators and others in Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Nevada are devoting time to the issue of federal land management in their states. Representatives of those states explained their efforts to the EQC at the May meeting.

The EQC is conducting a study pursuant to Senate Joint Resolution 15, passed by the 2013 Legislature to evaluate the management of certain federal lands in Montana, assess risks, and identify solutions. The EQC appointed a work group that is chaired by Sen. Jennifer Fielder and that meets about every two weeks. The group includes Sen. Brad Hamlett and Reps. Ed Lieser and Kerry White.

In Idaho, 11 legislators serve on the Federal Lands Interim Committee with a mission of ascertaining the process for the state to acquire title to and control of public lands now controlled by the federal government in Idaho.

The Wyoming committee is charged with reviewing federal policies or actions that may impact the management, development, or use of the state’s natural resources. The six legislators are also developing legislative responses to federal

policies and actions necessary to protect the interests of the state of Wyoming, including issues related to the structure of ownership of federal lands within the state.

County commissioners from each of Nevada’s counties make up the Nevada Land Management Task Force. The task force is conducting a study to address the transfer of public lands in Nevada from the federal government to Nevada, in contemplation of Congress turning over the management and control of those public lands on or before June 30, 2015.

Utah has a number of entities involved with studying federal land management. Rep. Keven Stratton, chair of the Public Lands Caucus, spoke to the EQC.

More information on committees studying federal lands in other states can be found [here](#).

For more information on the SJR 15 study, contact Joe Kolman, legislative environmental analyst, at 444-3747 or jkolman@mt.gov.

SJR 4 Study: State Historic Properties

The EQC agreed to proceed with draft legislation proposed by the SJR 4 work group, which undertook the study of the Montana Heritage Commission’s administration of state-owned properties at Virginia City, Nevada City, and Reeder’s Alley in Helena. The legislation is intended to streamline and update the MHC’s governing statutes, incorporating many of the items discussed by the work group and the EQC during this interim’s study.

Key features of the draft include:

- removal of language requiring MHC to continue to acquire property and purchase fee title interests in real and personal property, leaving the focus on managing properties the state has already acquired;
- removal of references to MHC-managed properties being economically independent and self-supporting, providing instead that the goal be economic stability;
- revision of the authority for appointing MHC members, so that if the speaker of the House of Representatives and the president of the Senate do not appoint the members for which they are responsible, the authority reverts to the governor;
- removal of language that requires certain MHC profits to be deposited in the Cultural and Aesthetic Trust account;
- removal of language that requires proceeds from the sale of personal property from the Bovey assets be placed in a trust fund; and
- removal of language expressing the intent of the 58th Legislature that no general fund money be provided for

the operations and maintenance of the properties beyond what the 55th Legislature appropriated.

Members will review the bill draft again at the July meeting.

For more information on the SJR 4 study, contact Leanne Kurtz, legislative research analyst, at 444-3593 or lekurtz@mt.gov.

Other Topics

The EQC voted to send a letter to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks as well as the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) asking that the IGBC and all appropriate state and federal agencies immediately update the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan and other related resource management plans and agency activities so that they are based upon the best available science related to grizzly bears.

The EQC wrote that the use of current scientific information is expected to better inform resource managers of bear habits and provide evidence that could lead to improved management and expedited removal of the grizzly from the endangered species list, bringing much-needed relief to resource managers and people in affected communities.

Next Meeting

The council meets next on July 9-10 at the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the council's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the council's website or contact Joe Kolman, council staff.

Council Website: www.leg.mt.gov/eqc

Council Staff: jkolman@mt.gov or 406-444-3747

LJIC Looks at Parole Issues, Options

Corrections topics filled most of the agenda at the most recent meeting of the Law and Justice Interim Committee as members concentrated on their Senate Joint Resolution 3 study of the Board of Pardons and Parole.

First, the committee looked east to South Dakota for a comparison of correctional and parole policies.

The general counsel for the South Dakota governor, the state policy director of the Public Safety Performance Project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, and Montana Corrections Director Mike Batista reviewed recent legislation developed in South Dakota to address that state's correctional and sentencing challenges. They also compared that state's policy to Montana's policy and announced that Pew would be working with the Department of Corrections to study Montana's unique corrections and sentencing system to learn if there are areas that the state could change to make it more effective.

The director of the South Dakota parole board discussed his state's "new" and "old" parole systems. The "new" system requires the corrections staff to create an individual program directive (IPD) for each inmate. An IPD consists of behavior, work, education, and treatment requirements for that inmate. If the prison warden determines that the inmate is in compliance with the IDP when the inmate is eligible for parole, the inmate will be released without a parole hearing. If the inmate is not in compliance, the board will hold a hearing to determine if the inmate should receive parole. The "old" system gave the state parole board discretion in determining whether to parole an offender, similar to the system currently in use in Montana.

Corrections topics also included a review of the Montana Re-Entry Initiative Task Force, which was created by House Bill 68 in 2013. The task force has met nearly monthly throughout the interim to study ways to smooth offenders' re-entry from correctional facilities into Montana communities. The task force will present an in-depth report of its work at the committee's June meeting.

Also at the April 28 meeting, committee members received an overview of certain financial obligations that parolees face as a result of their involvement with the judicial and correctional systems. Obligations can include court and attorney costs, restitution, fines for misdemeanor and felony convictions, treatment court costs, parole supervision fees, and program fees for treatment or pre-release residency.

During the afternoon, the committee heard from a county attorney and a deputy county attorney about concerns over the salaries paid to deputy county attorneys. Then, the members turned their attention to receiving public comment on draft language for several possible bills it is considering recommending to the next Legislature. Those bills result from the committee's study of the parole board and the family law system in Montana. The committee took no action on any of the drafts, instead suggesting several changes to the language and asking to review the drafts again in June.

Coming Up

At its June meeting, the committee will:

- review legislative concepts for the 2015 Legislature from the agencies under its jurisdiction and from the judicial branch;
- continue its study of mental illness and the National Instant Criminal Background Check System;
- hear an update from the State Bar of Montana about a recent meeting it held on family law;

- learn about collaborative law and how it might be used to ease problems encountered by litigants, attorneys, and judges in family law disputes; and
- learn more about oversight of various Department of Corrections contracts.

The committee also will take public comment on whether it should draft a letter to the FBI asking the agency to conduct an investigation of the Crossroads Correctional Center in Shelby. Members voted in April to draft a letter for review in June. Because the issue came up at the end of the meeting when public attendance was sparse, the committee will hear comments in June before it decides whether to proceed with a draft letter.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on June 26-27 in Room 102 of the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Rachel Weiss, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/ljic

Committee Staff: rweiss@mt.gov or 406-444-5367

Audit Committee Reviews 13 Audits

The Legislative Audit Committee met May 23 at the Capitol in Helena to review recent audits of state programs and services. The committee heard reports on the following topics.

Financial Compliance Audits

- An audit report of the Department of Agriculture (13-21) contained no recommendations to the department. There was a financial misstatement related to recording pesticide applicator surety bonds and certificates of deposit in an agency fund, rather than a private purpose trust fund as required by state accounting policy, resulting in a qualified opinion.
- The Department of Livestock (13-22) received four recommendations concerning compliance with state laws related to issuing payments only upon an appropriation made by law, setting livestock per capita fees, using deferred revenues to fund current year operations, and monitoring contract organizations whose records are used in financial reporting. The report also contained two recommendations to the Department of Commerce, related to a conflict of interest at the Board of Horse Racing and verification of simulcast wagering information for the Board of Horse Racing.
- The Montana Arts Council's audit report (13-24) contained one recommendation related to weaknesses identified in transaction and internal control reviews.

- The Montana Single Audit Report (12-02) is a statewide biennial report which complies with the Single Audit Act Amendments of 1996 and Office of Management and Budget Circular A 133 that require the auditor to issue certain financial, internal control, and compliance reports.

Financial Audits

- A Montana Water Pollution Control and Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Programs (13-25A) audit contained no recommendations.
- The Public Employees' Retirement Board (12-08B) audit contained one recommendation related to maintaining actuarial soundness in three retirement plans (Sheriffs' Retirement System, Game Wardens' and Peace Officers' Retirement System, and Highway Patrol Officers' Retirement System) required by the Montana Constitution.
- The State of Montana (13-01A) report contained the Independent Auditor's Report on the basic financial statements and the Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards of the state of Montana. The report contained one disclosure issue related to Old Fund estimates and one recommendation related to a material weakness in internal control over the Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards preparation process.

Performance Audits

- The Childhood Immunization Requirements in Montana (13P-07) report made 10 recommendations related to ensuring immunization compliance at all preschools, more actively monitoring immunization compliance at child care facilities and elementary schools, addressing data quality protection and guidance for use of the state's immunization registry (imMTrax), and aligning Montana's immunization requirements with current standards of care.
- The Universal System Benefits (USB) Program (13P-06) audit made recommendations related to the Public Service Commission more thoroughly reviewing individual utility's USB programs and better documenting its decisions associated with USB activities. It recommended that the Department of Revenue take steps to improve the tools available to strengthen oversight of self-directed activities of large customers. The audit also recommended that the Legislature determine if large customers' USB expenditures are meeting public purpose benefits as originally intended.

Contract Audits

- An audit of claims technology (13C-09) utilized by Blue Cross Blue Shield, Cigna, Delta Dental, Med Impact, and NewWest made recommendations in several areas

including overpayments, over-age dependents, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) coding, and documentation accuracy.

- A Dawson Community College (13C-06) audit recommended that the college perform timely reconciliations and retain necessary subsidiary ledgers. A second recommendation stated that internal controls and documentation standards should be established in order to ensure that the provisions of Section 19-20-302, MCA, are applied consistently and correctly.
- Audit reports for Flathead Community College (13C-07) and Miles Community College (13C-08) contained no recommendations.

The committee also discussed performance audit projects for the next fiscal year.

The Legislative Audit Division provides independent and objective evaluations of the stewardship, performance, and cost of government policies, programs, and operations. The division is responsible for conducting financial, performance, and information system audits of state agencies or their programs, including the Montana University System. For more information, call the division at 406-444-3122 or visit its website. To search for a specific audit, use the identifier listed above in parentheses.

To report suspected improper acts committed by state agencies, departments, or employees, call the division fraud hotline at 800-222-4446 or 406-444-4446 in Helena.

Division Website: www.leg.mt.gov/audit

Division Contact: 406-444-3122

Council to Continue Legislative Review, Plan for 2015 Session

The Legislative Council will hear a final installment of legislative practices in other states when it meets June 9-10 in Helena.

The information will focus on interim committees, which meet in between legislative sessions. Information related to the council's review of legislative practices can be found on the new Legislative Improvement page of the council's website.

Council members also will plan for the 2015 legislative session, review the 2017 biennium budget for the Legislature, and hear more about the e-mail project for legislators. The Electronic Communications Subcommittee will meet at 8 a.m. on June 10 and will provide a report to the full council later that day.

The council meeting begins at 1 p.m. on June 9 in Room 102 of the Capitol. The meeting continues at 9 a.m. on June 10, following the meeting of the Electronic Communications Subcommittee.

For more information on the committee's activities and the upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Susan Byorth Fox, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/legcouncil

Committee Staff: sfox@mt.gov or 406-444-3066

Finance Committee to Hear Budget Reports in June

The Legislative Finance Committee will hear two major reports on state finances when it meets June 5-6 in Helena.

The Legislative Fiscal Division will present:

- the 2015 Biennium Update Report, which focuses on spending and revenues to date with emphasis on Medicaid monitoring, spending of funding provided in Senate Bill 410, and other budget supplementals; and
- the 2017 Biennium Budget Outlook Report, which will offer the earliest opportunity for the committee to examine possible risks and pressures in the upcoming 2017 biennium budget and receive revenue trend updates.

In March, the committee created a subcommittee to oversee the Medicaid Management Information System (MMIS). Subcommittee members are Sen. Mary Caferro, D-Helena; Sen. Rick Ripley, R-Wolf Creek; Rep. Pat Noonan, D-Ramsay; and Rep. Rob Cook, R-Conrad.

Members will update the full committee on actions taken since the March meeting. The state's chief information officer and LFD staff also will provide reports on the MMIS project and other state information technology projects.

LFC Presiding Officer Llew Jones also established a subcommittee consisting of Caferro and Cook to attend meetings of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) strategic planning group. They will update the committee on actions taken at the most recent planning group meeting.

In addition, the committee will:

- review budget rule recommendations for the upcoming 2015 legislative session;
- discuss language to implement the legislative budget policy;
- continue the House Joint Resolution 17 study of state pay plans;

- receive pension system updates; and
- continue discussion of the local government project with an emphasis on the impacts to schools and communities.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next at 10 a.m. on June 5 in Room 102 of the Capitol in Helena. The meeting continues at 8 a.m. on June 6. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Legislative Fiscal Analyst Amy Carlson.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/lfc

Committee Staff: acarlson@mt.gov or 406-444-2986

RTIC Continues Study of Tax Appeal Process, Oversize Loads

The Revenue and Transportation Interim Committee continued to work in May on its studies of the taxpayer appeal process and the movement of oversize loads.

Also at its May 6 meeting, the committee heard a presentation on local government reimbursements, received a general revenue fund update, and continued its review of advisory councils.

SJR 23 Study: Taxpayer Appeal Process

As part of the Senate Joint Resolution 23 study of the taxpayer appeal process, the committee received information it had requested on the history of the Workers' Compensation Court and an overview of the workload and costs for the State Tax Appeal Board, the Workers' Compensation Court, and the Water Court. The study resolution also called for the committee to consider mediation. An overview of current mediation options generated discussion resulting in two requests for additional information on Department of Revenue considerations related to the decision to enter into mediation and examples of existing requirements for mandatory mediation in other agencies.

The committee also received a staff presentation on representation at the State Tax Appeal Board and received public comment requesting that the committee recommend that certified public accountants be allowed to represent clients at the State Tax Appeal Board. An individual legislator has requested a bill draft on this topic, and the committee asked that the draft be presented to the committee at a future meeting.

Staff also presented a bill draft aimed at allowing industrial property taxpayers to have the option to appeal to the county tax appeal board or the State Tax Appeal Board. Those offering public comment suggested changes to the draft that will be presented at the July meeting.

The committee worked through a decision tool that identified questions for consideration in deciding whether to recommend changes to the taxpayer appeal process. The committee did not request additional draft bills or make any recommendations or findings in May.

SJR 26 Study: Oversize Loads

As part of the SJR 26 study, staff attorney Jaret Coles presented the committee with a requested legal analysis indicating that the city of Missoula may not have the authority to issue oversize load permits on a federal highway.

The committee also received public comment on whether to recommend the creation of oversize load corridors. The comments ranged from suggestions that the Department of Transportation be authorized to establish preferred oversize load routes to requests that the committee consider community and environmental impacts. In addition to the comments about oversize load corridors, the committee also received general comments about the movement of oversize loads, including requests that the committee draft legislation to prohibit local governments from issuing oversize load permits and to allow traffic delays of up to 15 minutes. Administrative rule currently limits delays to 10 minutes or less.

The Department of Transportation presented figures on the number and types of oversize load permits issued in recent years, and staff gave a briefing on statutory impediments to private, cooperative funding of oversize routes.

For the next meeting, the committee asked staff to provide a summary of impediments identified by stakeholders and a map identifying routes accessible by oversize loads.

Other Items

The committee received a presentation deferred from the February meeting on the history of the entitlement share payment. The Department of Revenue will follow up with additional information on the portion of the entitlement share payment that is attributable to the recent reduction in the tax rate for business personal property.

The Department of Revenue provided the committee with additional information about a proposed rule that would have prohibited a tax increment finance (TIF) district from crossing school district boundaries. Upon further consideration, DOR indicated there is a potential problem when a TIF district contains two or more of any type of taxing jurisdiction, not just two or more school districts. The department plans to talk with stakeholders and continue to work on the issue.

The agency also provided information on the compliance program for the income tax credit available to seniors who pay property taxes (referred to as 2EC), updated figures for

tax fraud, information on the agency's IT systems, and 2014 tax season filing data.

Transportation Director Mike Tooley updated the committee on the status of the federal highway funding. The current legislation, MAP-21, will expire on Sept. 30, 2014. Tooley also discussed the de-icer used by the department and confirmed that there have been no recent changes to the chemicals used. He told the committee, however, that the considerable amount of snow this year required use of more de-icer than in drier years.

As part of its review of advisory councils, the committee recommended retention of the Scenic-Historic Byways Advisory Council and the Forest Lands Taxation Advisory Council. The committee also recommended retention of the Advisory Council for the Multistate Tax Compact and passage of a bill to amend the authorizing statute to require that the advisory council only be appointed if there are local subdivisions affected by the compact. During discussions about the Agricultural Valuation Advisory Council, the committee informally requested a bill draft to require the appointment of legislators to the advisory council. The committee will review the requested draft at the July meeting and make a recommendation at that time.

The committee also received a general fund update from the Legislative Fiscal Division. Collections are below the overall growth estimate contained in SJR 2.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on July 16-17 in Room 102 of the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Megan Moore, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/rtic

Committee Staff: memoore@mt.gov or 406-444-4496

SAVA to Consider Veterans' Affairs, Political Practices, Elections, and Pensions

The State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee will meet June 5 to hear from veterans about whether to establish a state veterans' affairs ombudsman, consider a bill changing how the commissioner of political practices is selected, continue revisions of election deadlines, and discuss whether to make changes to contribution rates in the Public Employees' Retirement System (PERS).

The discussion of an ombudsman for veterans is an emerging issue raised in public testimony. Scheduled speakers will represent the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Montana's congressional delegation, and mental health treatment providers.

Political Practices

The bill to change the selection process for the commissioner of political practices is a preliminary recommendation under the House Joint Resolution 1 study of the commissioner's office and duties.

The preliminary bill draft would add a fifth member to the current four-member nomination committee. That panel consists of the Legislature's majority and minority political party leadership; members must, by majority vote, submit a list of two to five names to the governor for potential appointment to the post. Having an odd number of members would avoid tie votes for making nominations to the governor.

The bill would also require the governor to appoint the commissioner from the list of nominees. Currently, the governor may appoint someone who has not been nominated by the committee.

Election Study

The election law revisions relate to the Senate Joint Resolution 14 study, which requested recommendations on how to combine primary and school elections. A SAVA subcommittee examined the challenges of combining these elections and determined that a general cleanup and revision of conflicting deadlines is needed before the idea of combining elections could be seriously considered.

The preliminary bill draft is still a work in progress, but as currently drafted would, among other changes:

- require all special purpose district elections to be held on the same day as school elections;
- establish uniform candidate filing deadlines;
- require school elections to be called at least 70 days before the election, rather than only 40 days in advance; and
- apply late voter registration to all elections. Currently, school district elections run by school clerks do not allow late voter registration. However, if the school election is run by the county election administrator, late voter registration does apply.

Retirement Contributions

The proposal to establish adjustable contributions in PERS arose because of passage of House Bill 454 in 2013. The bill, which provided additional funding to PERS to help the system regain actuarial soundness, increased contributions by employees and employers but provided that those increases would terminate when the system achieved certain funding thresholds. No provision was made to allow the contributions to be reinstated without legislative action if the system's funding ever again fell below those thresholds.

The preliminary bill draft would allow for adjustable contribution rates within specific and limited parameters. The bill's language largely mirrors the provisions adopted by the Legislature under HB 377 for the Teachers' Retirement System.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next at 9 a.m. on June 5 in Room 137 of the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, please visit the committee's website or contact Sheri Scurr, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/sava

Committee Staff: sscurr@mt.gov or 444-3596

State-Tribal Committee Hears CSKT Concerns

The State-Tribal Relations Interim Committee discussed topics ranging from school funding to water rights during a joint meeting with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes in Pablo in late April.

During the tribes' portion of the April 28 agenda, Thomas McDonald of the CSKT Natural Resources Department discussed the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act. He said that various tribes oversee and are responsible for management of these resources. However, while the federal funding formula can count tribal lands, waters, recreationists, and populations for returning the federal excise tax dollars to each state, the tribes do not receive a portion of the funds.

Sen. Jonathan Windy Boy, presiding officer of the State-Tribal Committee, said the committee would review past legislative discussions about possible reallocation of such monies and will discuss whether communication with the Montana congressional delegation might be warranted.

CSKT Tribal Council staff also discussed state education funding for the Two Eagle River School and the Northern Cheyenne School. The schools are both Bureau of Indian Education (BIE)-funded tribal schools and do not receive state dollars. However, the tribes believe that receipt of BIE funding does not preclude eligibility for other state or federal assistance to the schools.

Windy Boy said committee staff will speak with the Office of Public Instruction, the superintendent of Two Eagle River School, and Gov. Steve Bullock's education adviser on the question of state funding for the two schools.

During the committee's portion of the agenda, members heard an update on activities undertaken by the Governor's Office of Indian Affairs. In addition, committee staff provided:

- a summary of actions resulting from committee visits to Fort Belknap, Crow Agency, and the Montana Women's Prison in Billings; and
- an update on the progress of the Montana Indian Language Preservation Pilot Programs around the state. The eight tribal pilots were described as being assessed in compliance to date. Personnel directly involved with the Salish and Kootenai language pilots also described their own efforts in more detail.

As it has done in past meetings at Fort Belknap and Crow Agency, the committee also heard presentations about bison management. Members of the CSKT Natural Resources Department and Legal Department discussed topics regarding the National Bison Range as well as the bison in and near Yellowstone National Park.

Finally, the committee and tribal council members heard presentations about the status of the CSKT Water Compact and possible ways to advance the compact. Speakers included representatives of the CSKT Tribal Council, the Reserved Water Rights Compact Commission, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the Jocko Irrigation District. Daniel McCool, director of the Environmental and Sustainability Studies Program at the University of Utah, also spoke on water compacts and litigation in other states.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next on July 24-25. On July 24, members will meet with the Little Shell Tribal Council in Great Falls and also meet with staff and inmates of the Crossroads Correctional Facility in Shelby. On July 25, the committee will meet in Room 137 of the Capitol in Helena. For more information on the committee's activities and upcoming meeting, visit the committee's website or contact Casey Barrs, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/tribal

Committee Staff: cbarrs@mt.gov or 406-444-3957

Technical Experts to Vet CSKT Compact

The Water Policy Interim Committee voted May 13 to form a working group of experts to examine technical aspects of the proposed water rights settlement with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

John Metesh, director of the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, will assemble and lead a team of technical experts. The CSKT Compact Technical Working Group will report on its initial scope of work to the committee in the coming weeks. The committee asked the working group to complete its analysis by August. The group's meetings will be publicly noticed.

The group was formed partly in response to a request by Rep. Nancy Ballance, R-Hamilton, and Rep. Keith Regier, R-Kalispell, for legal, environmental, and economic analysis of the proposed water rights settlement.

The committee also directed Legislative Services Division staff to answer questions posed by Ballance and Regier regarding legal or constitutional issues about the compact. Rep. Dan Salomon, R-Ronan, told the committee that some reservation irrigators are commissioning an economic analysis of the compact by the University of Montana’s Bureau of Business and Economic Research.

The 2013 Legislature did not pass the proposed CSKT settlement, also known as a compact. Most recently, Gov. Steve Bullock and Tribal Chairman Ronald Trahan agreed to reopen negotiations this summer in order to solve some legal issues regarding an appendix to the compact. This appendix, the Water Use Agreement, spells out how much water would be available to irrigators, how much would be kept in reservation streams, and what improvements would be made to the Flathead Indian Irrigation Project.

Water Court Report Suggests Legal Fixes

Also at the May 12-13 meeting, the committee heard preliminary recommendations from a Montana Supreme Court-commissioned study of the state’s legal system for water rights. As part of the study, students at the University of Montana Law School interviewed 50 water users, attorneys, court and agency staff, and staff in eight Western states. The

study may also include draft legislation related to at least some of the following recommendations:

- streamline jurisdiction between the Water Court and district courts;
- create an interagency agreement between the district courts, Supreme Court, and Water Court regarding water rights record-keeping;
- encourage educational “water walks” by court and agency staff with local water users;
- synchronize the change of the water right process in the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation with decrees and determinations by the Water Court; and
- study the role of water commissioners and the associated statutes.

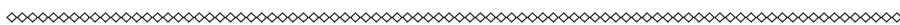
The committee awaits release of the final Supreme Court report and will discuss the issue again at its July 7-8 meeting.

Next Meeting

The committee meets next via conference call at 10 a.m. on June 6; members of the public may attend the meeting in Room 335 of the Capitol in Helena. The committee also agreed to an August meeting, in addition to its scheduled July 7-8 and Sept. 8-9 meetings. For more information on the committee’s activities and upcoming meetings, visit the committee’s website or contact Jason Mohr, committee staff.

Committee Website: www.leg.mt.gov/water

Committee Staff: jasonmohr@mt.gov or 406-444-1640



The Back Page

More Than Statistics: Reviewing the Faces, Factors Behind Montana Suicides

**by Sue O’Connell
Legislative Research Analyst
Legislative Services Division**

On May 15, seven people set aside the day to turn their attention to an emotionally draining endeavor – examining the details of 41 suicide deaths from recent weeks.

It’s a task they’ll tackle about every six weeks for the foreseeable future, as members of the newly formed Montana Suicide Review Team. Their charge is to take a close look at the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Montanans who have ended their own lives.

It’s sobering work. The seven team members sort through death certificates, coroner reports, medical records, and other

items linked to each person’s death as they seek to understand what led to the suicide. They start with a mere statistic: 41 recent suicides, for example. But as they review the information, they form a picture of each person’s final days and hours.

“They’re real people. They were at the lowest point of their lives,” notes Dr. Leonard Lantz, a Helena psychiatrist who serves as chairman of the team.

Had something gone differently as they struggled with their problems, their cases might not have been under review. And

that's what team members are looking for -- what might have prevented each of the suicides.

"Every person who dies by suicide deserves to have someone try to look at what happened and what's available that might have made a difference," Lantz said the day before the Suicide Review Team was to meet in Billings.



Dr. Leonard Lantz testifies on HB 583

Lantz championed the proposal for the Montana Suicide Review Team during the 2013 Legislature, working to draft House Bill 583 and testifying as it was considered in House and Senate committees.

He came up with the idea because he thinks Montana needs to do something to reverse the startling statistics related to suicide in this state. Montana's suicide prevention officer, Karl Rosston, cites statistics that include:

- more than 220 Montanans have killed themselves each year this decade -- at least 227 in 2010, 225 in 2011, 226 in 2012 and more than 240 in 2013, for which official figures are not yet available;
- Montana's suicide rate, at 22.9 suicides per 100,000 people in 2010, was about double the national average of 12.43;
- Montana's youth suicide rate was 21.66 per 100,000 people in 2010, compared with a national rate of 10.54; and
- for more than three decades, Montana has ranked among the five states with the highest suicide rates. And it has been near the top since the state began tracking vital statistics in 1918.

So far this year, officials have confirmed 76 suicides from Jan. 1 through May 7. Another 37 determinations were still pending as of mid-May.

Legislature Acts on Concerns

Lawmakers heard many of the statistics during the 2013 session, as proponents asked them to support creation of the team.

Rep. Rob Cook, sponsor of HB 583, emphasized Montana's lengthy tenure among the states with the highest suicide rates. He told fellow legislators that HB 583 would help the state better target the money that's spent on prevention efforts.¹

"We kind of just pour money into the top of this problem," he told the House Appropriations Committee, "but we don't

know who to target, what indicators to look for, or how best to help."

Advocates hope the team will be able to develop statewide, regional, or local strategies after collecting and studying records related to the deaths.

The team is modeled on county-level review teams created in Montana and many other states to review the causes of fetal, infant, and child deaths of all types. However, no state has a team devoted solely to reviewing death by suicide. And the fetal, infant, and child death reviews are done at a local -- not statewide -- level.

Lantz believes a statewide review of suicides will help better define the problem and point the way for future efforts. But developing the process for the review has taken some time.

"We've had to kind of start from scratch," said Rosston, who provides staff support to the team and serves as a non-voting member.

He developed a manual for the team's work that is based largely on the process used by the county-level teams that review fetal and child deaths. The manual also pulled in materials from Manitoba, which conducted a research project in 2008 to review suicide deaths. The Canadian province wanted to develop information that would help communities better identify people at risk of suicide and to undertake evidence-based efforts to prevent future deaths.

Lantz said he proposed the review team because he was frustrated by the lack of data to support prevention efforts.

"A lot of people think the way to solve a complex problem is just to bring an expert in and do what they say," he said. "I don't think that's the best way to do this."

Instead, Lantz wanted to use a more scientific approach for developing potential prevention efforts. That method involves gathering information, forming a hypothesis, and then testing and retesting that idea.

A science-based process, Lantz believes, will help determine the types of efforts that would best prevent suicides in Montana. It also could help tailor those efforts to meet the needs of specific areas of the state.

Putting the Idea to Work

Gov. Steve Bullock appointed members to the team in November, and they met for the first time in January. At that time, they discussed the work ahead of them and the process they would use to carry it out.

The Billings meeting was their fourth, and the second at which they reviewed deaths that had occurred in recent weeks.

Rosston facilitates the review by collecting the information available on each death. He starts with the death certificate that must be filed any time a person dies. From there, he gathers the coroner's report, any reports showing whether alcohol or drugs were in the person's system, and any available information about the person's recent visits to a physician or mental health provider. He also sends a questionnaire to the county coroner, asking things such as whether the person:

- attempted suicide previously;
- had a criminal history;
- recently suffered problems with or loss of a relationship;
- recently experienced any financial problems or losses; or
- left a suicide note.

He also asks the coroner to provide any copies of notes taken as part of the investigation.

It's sensitive information, and the law protects its confidentiality. It's also difficult information to collect, in some instances. Rosston took the Montana Law Enforcement Academy class for newly elected coroners and deputy coroners, to better understand their job duties and how they conduct death investigations. He's also working closely with the coroners to develop more standardized reports for suicide deaths.

Montana Suicide Review Team Members

Gov. Bullock appointed the members of the Suicide Review Team in November 2013. House Bill 583 required that members represent certain professions or groups. The members and the professions or groups they represent are:

- Psychiatrist: Dr. Leonard Lantz, Helena
- Psychologist: Bowman Smelko, Helena
- Licensed Clinical Social Worker: Carol Josephson, Elliston
- Clergy: Vicki Waddington, Sidney
- Law Enforcement: Gallatin County Sheriff Brian Gootkin, Bozeman
- Advocacy Organization: Stephanie Iron Shooter, Billings

Karl Rosston, the state suicide prevention officer, also serves as a non-voting member.

After Rosston collects the materials, he compiles it into packets for the team members. He also selects the information he considers most relevant about each death. That information is put into a database for analysis by the team.

At their meetings, members review the materials provided on each death and try to identify what may have prevented it -- whether that would have been a greater awareness of the risk factors, more access to counseling, less access to guns, or something else. A map of Montana shows where each of the suicides occurred, helping members spot clusters of suicides or any other patterns that might inform their efforts.

Lantz hopes that over time, the team will be able to identify patterns that could lead to proposals for preventive efforts or interventions that evidence has proven to be effective.

What Other Groups Have Found

Reports by other groups that have reviewed deaths, including suicides, give some indications of possible patterns and recommendations.

For example, a Department of Public Health and Human Services review of childhood suicides in Montana from 2006 to 2012 indicated that the suicide rate was higher for Indian children than for white children, that more white children than Indian children used guns to commit suicide, and that 17 of the youths had previously attempted suicide and 22 of them had talked about suicide.² Steps recommended in the report included:

- reducing access to lethal methods, including making sure that guns are unloaded and locked up;
- instructing parents and educators about identifying and responding to the warning signs of youth suicide; and
- providing effective clinical treatment and other support services to children who have previously attempted suicide.

In Manitoba, the 2008 review of suicides found that the method of suicide varied by region. That led to a recommendation that prevention efforts should be targeted to specific groups and communities.³

Influence of Geographic, Cultural Factors

Rosston expects the review team will find that certain geographical and social factors play a role in Montana's suicides. He pointed to isolation as one example. Montana has just 6.8 people per square mile, he said, compared with the national average of 88.7 people per square mile.

Many Montanans also have ready access to guns, making it easier to complete suicide, he noted. Rosston said that in 2013, guns were used in 64 percent of the adult suicide

deaths in Montana and in 68 percent of the adolescent suicides. Nationally, that figure is closer to 50 percent, he said.

And the stigma involved with mental illness keeps many people from seeking help, he said. Montana's "cowboy mentality" means that many people don't perceive their depression as a real problem or don't want to burden others with their troubles, he said.

Lantz recognizes that some of the circumstances unique to Montana are ingrained and here to stay. He says the team will have to take that into account as members develop recommendations.

"We're not going to change Montana culture," he said. But he added that the team's work may lead to a better understanding of the degree to which certain factors -- say, guns or alcohol -- affect the suicide rate. In turn, he said, that could lead to a productive conversation in which Montanans would willingly discuss ways to improve gun safety or to better educate people about the ways in which alcohol can affect people's defense mechanisms and increase their willingness to take risks.

The process of collecting and analyzing data and using that information to make recommendations will take time. HB 583 authorized the review team for a three-year period and appropriated \$67,000 a year for it in this biennium. Its work will end on June 30, 2016, unless the 2015 Legislature gives it more time.

Lantz is optimistic the team will make progress, but said it will take time.

"I really think we can make a difference," he said, but added: "I'm not in it for the quick win."

He said the team may need a few more years' worth of data before it sees statistically significant patterns that would allow members to develop meaningful conclusions and recommendations.

He's also not expecting the team's work to eliminate suicides in Montana, saying that's an unrealistic goal. He offered a more realistic assessment as he headed off to the team's fourth meeting: "I would like our suicide rates to get to at least even with the national average."

¹ Hearing on House Bill 583, House Appropriations Committee, March 12, 2013.

² "Child Suicide Deaths, Montana, 2006-2012," Montana Fetal, Infant, Child, and Maternal Mortality Review, *Department of Public Health and Human Services*, March 2014.

³ "Manitoba Adult Suicide Mortality Review: Risk Factors Associated with Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders," *Winnipeg Regional Health Authority*, March 10, 2009.