

Health department



Record-Eagle file photo/Mardi Link

**Grand Traverse County Health director
Dr. Michael Collins in his office in January 2020.**

County medical officer let go

BY PATTI BRANDT BURGESS

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TRAVERSE CITY — The long-time medical director of the Grand Traverse County Health Department was effectively terminated when his contract was not renewed.

The contract for Dr. Michael Collins, who has been with the health department for 28 years, expires on Thursday, which will be his last day.

Collins said he was given no reason from county Administrator Nate Alger for the contract not being renewed. But he suspects that his critique of county health policy is behind it, Collins said.

Collins' forum published in the Record-Eagle on Aug. 27 in response to the Vaccine Awareness and Medical Autonomy resolution passed earlier in the month by the county Board of Commissioners.

In it Collins asserted that the board "has crossed the line from illogical opinion to irresponsibility."

The commissioners' resolution aimed at the health department, Collins wrote, and would ban it from mandating that its own employees get vaccinated, among other things.

The resolution, brought forward by board Chairman Rob Hentschel, bans the county from mandating vaccines and proof of COVID testing for employees and changes messaging distributed by the county health department to include encouraging people to talk to their health care provider about the risks and benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Collins said the resolution essentially gagged the health department.

"I saw it coming," Collins said of his being let go. "I think it's too bad that the health department can't be autonomous and use its best judgment and have its opinions openly shared ... Nobody should be in a better position to advise than the health department."

Since the county resolution was approved, federal requirements have called for all employers with more than 100 workers to be vaccinated or test for the virus weekly. Workers at health facilities that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid and contractors who do business with the federal government also will have to be vaccinated, with no option to test out.

Collins said he was contacted by Chris Forsyth, deputy county administrator, one or two days after his piece was published. Forsyth told him his contract would not likely be renewed, Collins said, and wanted Collins to resign.

"I told him that if I was going to be fired I wanted to be fired and not have people think I did it on my own," Collins said.

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Collins met with county Administrator Nate Alger last week and was told the county would exercise its option to not renew his contract, he said. Alger did not offer a reason, Collins said. When he asked for an explanation via email, the response from Alger was the same — his contract would not be renewed, Collins said. No reason given.

When contacted by the Record-Eagle, Alger said he spoke to health Director Wendy Hirschenberger and it was decided the health department would “go in a different direction.” When asked if Collins’ removal had anything to do with the forum piece or whether there were problems with his job performance, Alger declined to comment.

Collins said his emails and texts to Hirschenberger have been ignored, something he finds “infuriating and disrespectful” after all his years with the department.

Both Benzie and Leelanau counties attempted to undo a Benzie Leelanau District Health Department public health order that says schools must have mask mandates in place. The Benzie County Board called the order overreach. The Leelanau County Board voted to ask the department to rescind the order and recommend a mask-optional policy for Leelanau schools.

The Michigan Public Health Code states that only the Michigan health officer and county health departments have the authority to issue public health orders and those who defy them could face misdemeanor charges.

Health departments are independent units gov-

erned by Boards of Health, with county boards having no legal authority, according to Leelanau County attorneys Cohl, Stoker and Toskey, the firm that represents the majority of counties in the state.

In Grand Traverse County the Board of Commissioners also acts as the Board of Health, which is allowed under the state health code for departments comprised of a single county.

Hirschenberger’s contract, as well as Collins,’ is with the Grand Traverse County board.

A group of area pediatricians and Munson infectious disease consultant Chris Ledtke wrote a letter supporting Collins and the Health Department of Northwest Michigan and the Benzie-Leelanau District Health Department for their efforts during the pandemic.

The letter chastised those who use area health departments as political tools and limit public health experts whose job it is to help communities manage health crises.

“... Grand Traverse County is being held hostage by a commission of non-medical politicians, out of their lane and unaware of the fragility of our current medical system,” the letter stated. “There are patients unable to get medical care for strokes, heart attacks and kidney failure because hospitals are full of unvaccinated COVID patients utilizing finite resources.”

On Tuesday there were 53 COVID patients hospitalized in the Munson system, with 27 of them at the Traverse City hospital.

Overall, the two-week average COVID positivity rate in the region is at 11.7 percent, which is above the state average for the first time since the pandemic started, said Dr.

Christine Nefcy, Munson’s chief medical officer. The state average is 8.8 percent.

Nefcy is concerned about the positivity rate being seen in pediatric patients. In the 10-county region covered by District Health Department #10, for example, the rate has jumped from 1.7 percent in June to 14.3 percent in September, she said. Other departments are reporting similar numbers.

“The state is reporting they saw a pretty sharp uptick in the number of pediatric cases of COVID-19 and, as a result, an increase in pediatric hospitalizations,” Nefcy said.

Dr. James Robertson, a pediatrician at Kids Creek Children’s Clinic, said during the last year-and-a-half his office saw relatively few cases of upper respiratory infections.

“But as soon as school started this year it came back with a vengeance,” Robertson said. “We definitely in the office have seen more illness from schools that don’t mask.”

Two or three cases of COVID-19 are being seen every week, Robertson said. Children are also coming in with respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, with one or two cases per day needing inpatient care, he said.

RSV, which creates sticky globules that obstruct airways and cause respiratory distress, is being seen way earlier this year, Robertson said. There is also some concern that COVID makes it easier for RSV to spread, he said.

Demand for COVID testing is way up, Nefcy said. She urged people not to show up in emergency rooms or urgent care facilities just to get a COVID test, as those settings are busy and short staffed.

“When those urgent cares and emergency

departments are filled with people waiting just for testing who don’t really need to be seen or treated otherwise because they’re not having symptoms or their symptoms are very mild, that obviously delays care that we can provide for people who need it more urgently,” Nefcy said.

People having difficulty breathing, a high fever, weakness or who have underlying health risks should go to the ER, she

said. Those with mild symptoms should seek testing elsewhere, such as their health department, physician’s office or a pharmacy.

Before going to work for the health department in 1993, Collins was an obstetrician and gynecologist in Traverse City for 18 years. He left the practice in 1991 to become a biologist and earned degrees in ecology and evolutionary biology before switching to epidemiology, earning a

master’s degree.

After his forum ran, Collins said he heard from several health department employees who thanked him for speaking for them. On Monday he sent a farewell message to staff, telling them that the interference by the county board was unprecedented in his 28-year GTCHD experience, and that he didn’t regret saying it.

“I would write it again if I was given a do-over,” the message stated.

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