Public Health History Is Being Made

Public health history was made by the Colorado Legislature during the 2008 session with the passage of SB 194, the Public Health Revitalization Bill. Major Colorado public health legal changes have been made only three times – in 1893, 1948 and now 2008.

Although many citizens were disappointed that comprehensive health care reform did not occur this year, they may be heartened to know that public health, the foundation upon which all health care reform must be made, has made strides.

Public health reform occurred in 1948, due to the work of Dr. Florence Sabin, a retired physician and scientist who chaired Governor John Vivian’s committee on health. She was perceived as a nice old lady in her seventies who wouldn’t make too much trouble. She had returned to Colorado for her retirement, but she used her chairmanship to campaign for a public health laws to combat the high death and disease rates that were among the highest in the country. Her statue is one of two from Colorado that sits in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. to honor her work. The “Sabin Health Laws” modernized Colorado’s public health system. Several local health departments are celebrating their 60th anniversary in 2008 as their origin dates to the passage of the 1948 laws.

Many things change over 60 years, and public health in Colorado is in need of modernization and revitalization. SB 194, sponsored by Senator Bob Hagedorn and Representative Anne McGohon, will strengthen and further define Colorado’s public health system. It is based on the expectation that we all should have access to public health services, regardless of where we live, work or travel in Colorado. SB 194 mandates a statewide improvement plan, local public health improvement plans, and standards set by the Colorado State Board of Health. The bill recognizes that public health has evolved over the years and now deals with not just the communicable diseases of yesteryear, but also environmental health, obesity, tobacco use, food borne illnesses, new diseases such as West Nile virus, air and water pollution, lead based paint, hazardous materials exposure. The list goes on. Public health is given a modern and appropriate definition in the law.

Public health protects all of us everyday. It is about the water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the diseases we don’t get because of prevention, immunizations, and sanitation. Colorado will see changes in the next few years as public health moves into the future in Colorado.

I think Florence Sabin, Colorado’s public health hero, would be pleased that Colorado is moving forward to improve the protection given to its citizens.