



# THE DAILY STANDARD

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By Shelley Grieshop

## Agencies urged to merge

The Mercer County health department is the latest agency to feel the state's push for shared services.

Dale Palmer, administrator for the Mercer County-Celina City Health Department, told board members Wednesday that state legislators want all health departments serving populations under 100,000 to consolidate to save money.

"If we don't do it, it's going to happen to us anyway," he said, explaining the state likely will mandate the issue down the road. "We may as well be proactive."

Palmer said a meeting to discuss the issue is set for Nov. 14 with the Fab Four - health departments in Mercer, Auglaize, Van Wert and Allen counties - which for years have informally shared expenses, employees, grants and other services.

Palmer told the board that Allen County on its own would meet the 100,000-plus population standard set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to avoid consolidation.

"Mercer, Auglaize and Van Wert together would fit the model they're looking for," he said.

The state's focus to help health departments cut costs is paramount in Mercer County. In March, local residents voted against a 0.6-mill countywide property tax levy that would have provided needed funds to the department for operating costs in lieu of ongoing government funding cuts.

The state's shared services plan for health departments is being devised by the Legislative Committee on Public Health Futures. The committee on Oct. 31 completed its final report on the issue and made recommendations for inclusion in the state's 2014-2015 operating budget bill.

"Cross-jurisdictional shared services and consolidation are potential strategies for improving efficiency and quality," the committee stated in their recent report.

The Ohio Revised Code recently was amended to allow contiguous and noncontiguous city and county health districts to "contract/consolidate/merge" together within a reasonable geographic distance.

Several government agencies in Mercer and Auglaize counties already are sharing services and employees with neighboring counties such as the Ohio State University Extension Office.

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