Support modernization of public health

To the editor:

As we kick off National Public Health Week, April 6-12, it is an optimal time to ask the question: What should every Iowan expect from public health? Public health is the science and art of protecting and improving the health of communities through education, promotion of healthy lifestyles and research for disease and injury prevention.

With the severe weather of 2008, many Iowans had the opportunity to see public health in action in an extraordinarily visible way. Public health professionals were on the front lines of response along with our police, fire and emergency medical services counterparts coordinating evacuations, providing health service and responding to environmental contamination issues to name a few responsibilities.

As a public health professional committed to the health of Iowans, I know that a strong public health system is vital to the good health of all Iowans. However, depending on where you live in Iowa, you may receive different public health protection and services. Iowa needs a modern public health system that is integrated to provide a minimum level of public health services regardless of your ZIP code.

In public health, we like to think that when we are doing our job well, we are invisible. Disease outbreaks are prevented, babies are born healthy, food safety is ensured and health and wellness are promoted. However, as Iowa families are challenged economically, their health is also at a greater risk due to increased stress and reduced access to health care, good nutrition and safe housing.

Now is the time for Iowa to secure the health of the public and achieve greater efficiencies through the modernization of its public health system.

In the 2009 session, the Iowa Legislature will have the opportunity to pass the Iowa Public Health Modernization Act, HF 382. This legislation establishes a voluntary accreditation system for Iowa's local and state public health departments that will enhance organizational capacity and assure a basic level of public health service delivery in each of Iowa's counties. Public health system accreditation is a nationwide movement, and Iowa's ability to obtain federal funds may be impacted in the future based on Iowa's accreditation status.

I urge Iowa's legislators to protect and promote the health of Iowans by assuring a modernized, integrated system that equips governmental public health professionals with the tools and training they need to meet emerging health threats. Whether recovering from a natural disaster or detecting and responding to a disease outbreak or an environmental hazard, public health provides the first line of defense in protecting the health of Iowans.

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