



NWCCOG Celebrates 5 County Public Health Directors as our “Persons of the Year”

Introduction by Jill Hunsaker Ryan

Since the beginning of 2020, the public health field has responded to the largest pandemic in over 100 years-- trying to slow a virus that is unlike any others. SARS-CoV2 is certainly novel! Public health preparedness frameworks never fully contemplated a highly infectious, airborne agent with a clinical presentation that varies from no symptoms, to severe disease, and even death.

There have been challenges and lessons learned along the way, but there have also been countless demonstrations of resiliency, innovation, and grit from dedicated public health experts across our state. In many ways, Colorado has been a model for other states when it comes to slowing the spread of this deadly disease, and that wouldn't be the case without a statewide system of passionate public health professionals who are committed to doing everything they can to protect the health and safety of Coloradans. They are true community heroes.

These leaders have been there from the start, and they were there on March 5 when Colorado detected its first and second cases in out-of-state visitors to Summit and Eagle counties. Less than a week later, Pitkin County responded to one of the first clusters in Colorado.

The public health agencies in Colorado's northwest quickly mobilized to stand up community testing sites, monitor and investigate cases, provide contact tracing, and issue public health orders. These professionals have worked long hours and endless days since last February, having undoubtedly saved countless lives. They have also been crucial in the development of the state's COVID-19 Dial framework.

Since we are unable to measure what has been prevented, which is the unfortunate irony of public health practice, they may never fully get credit but are the community heroes of the pandemic.

Without hesitation they have risen to the occasion, bringing their scientific expertise and professionalism to the response, along with unparalleled commitment. Heath, Brene, Amy, Karen, Lynette and Jordana, each of you have done astonishing work during this difficult year. I'm proud to call you my peers and NWCCOG's People of the Year. Congratulations, and thank you!

Our local public health agencies will continue fighting the good fight as vaccines arrive and hope for the future begins to prosper. I'm ready to take on 2021 with them.

Jill



Jill Hunsaker Ryan
Executive Director



COLORADO
Department of Public
Health & Environment

Eagle County -- Public Health Director

Heath Harmon



Coming to the mountains after 20 years working through the ranks at Boulder County Public Health, imagine Harmon's excitement of being hired into his dream job in January of 2020 as Public Health Director for Eagle County. Not new to the Public Health arena, Harmon had served with roles in Emergency Preparedness as Program Coordinator for Communicable Disease, Environmental Health Specialist and finally as Director of Health Divisions in Boulder County, he provided oversight to a department of 139 employees engaged in a spectrum of public health programs there. His expertise uniquely qualified him for what was to come.

Little did he know that the events of 2020 would provide him with a "career year," and thrust he, his team and his colleagues to the forefront of the most important and controversial public realm decisions they had ever experienced. For Harmon, his colleagues celebrated here also, and for their teams, 2020 was a career year in the field.

As his appointment was announced in January, Deputy County Manager Kelley Collier said, "We are thrilled to have Heath join the Eagle County team. With his 25 years of experience in all realms of public health as well as his energetic approach to organizational and community engagement, we look forward to working with him to continue the great work of Eagle County Public Health. He is deeply committed to public service and public health and his personal values of integrity, teamwork, respect, trust, and creativity align naturally with Eagle County values." The Eagle County teams in public health, emergency management and communications working with the State were the first to be granted a variance, and the first to develop the "Five Commitments," and other key early communications tools which became widespread across the region and the state.

Luckily for Eagle County, Harmon's years of practical experience and education enabled him to provide the leadership and steadiness of hand that enabled Eagle County to manage and endure this past year. Thank you, Heath Harmon, and your entire team for an impressive effort on behalf of our community! You truly are a Person of the Year.

Grand County – Public Health Director Brene Belew-LaDue



This year has taken its toll on many people, not just teachers, hospitality workers, frontline healthcare providers and so many others, but also among the leadership positions in numerous organizations. Belew-LaDue told Grand County Commissioners, on December 8, after more than 17 years - that it was time for her "to prioritize her physical and mental health after a particularly difficult year."

Many of the stories we heard from industry officials cited the gut-wrenching decisions that needed to be made by all Public Health Directors – not just in our own backyard, but those played out on the stages all over the world – not the least of which in

Washington DC – stop the spread, or ruin the economy. It was front line Public Health Directors who were the front line in hearing from constituents. It often wasn't pretty. Like her peers, Belew-La-Due proved a valiant public servant, and in the end a human being just like the rest of us, though one put in the position to make the best decisions possible, with the information they have available to them. Guess what – those decisions don't always make people happy. Many residents of Grand County were among the last in the region to recognize the public health crisis, and combined with a healthy suspicion of government made sure that many decisions made also made some people very unhappy. Commissioner Kris Manguso confirmed seeing personal attacks from public and private citizens directed at Belew-LaDue. A few Health Directors in the region have even received death threats over unpopular choices.

"The health of the community has always been my first priority," Belew-LaDue said. "This decision is difficult for me, especially during such a time of great need."

We are optimistic about the future and wish the best for Belew-LaDue. From our perspective, we are proud of her service, that of her team and her eventual successor. She is a Person of the Year.

Jackson County – Public Health Director Dr. Lynette Telck



You don't know what you're missing until it is gone. This saying rings true in the case of Jackson County's Public Health Department. At the end of 2019, we were notified that the contractor who provided our public health needs intended to end their agreement with us, but afforded us some time to get our feet underneath us. Unfortunately, COVID happened and they ended their services even earlier than we had anticipated. With outcry from our community to provide public health before COVID, it was decided that it was time to bring our public health department back after many years of contracting the service.

It is safe to say that many of us have never seen a time that resembles our current situation with COVID. One of the great things about our small community is that the people who live here love it dearly. That is why we are so lucky to have Dr. Lynette Telck. She rose to the task of becoming our public health director on short notice and during a pandemic. Dr. Telck graduated from CU Medical School in 2002 with a specialty in family medicine. She has been and will continue to be a practicing physician in our community. She does not intend to remain as our public health director long-term, but her involvement has been monumental in the reformation of our department.

The new Jackson County public health nurse, Marcie Clendenen, has been an absolute bright spot in a somewhat dreary year. Marcie is a Jackson County native who saw an opportunity to help her community by coming home to offer her services and began her employment in November of 2020. She has an associate's degree in nursing from Miles Community College and has spent the last 17 years primarily working in Montana in various nursing and coordination positions. Her bubbly personality and can-do attitude made her the obvious choice and we are beyond grateful to have her. Not only is she filling the role of our public health nurse, but through an IGA with our local school, she is also the first school nurse we have had in our community for many years.

A transformation like this requires a great team. Samantha Martin and Jim Johnsen deserve mention in this article for their great support and involvement in this undertaking. Our community is truly fortunate to have all of these individuals and we are anxious to see how Marcie shapes this valuable program.



Pitkin County -- (recently former) Public Health Director Karen Koenemann And Interim Public Health Director Jordana Sabella

Jackson County wasn't the only place where a Health Department was overhauled through this pandemic year. The first outbreak of COVID in Colorado hit Pitkin County first. The County has been among the most aggressive in social distancing policies. The Pitkin County Public Health Department consisted of 5 employees when COVID began, and thanks, in part to the leadership of Koenemann, it quickly increased to 27 employees who continue to work tirelessly to manage all the challenges COVID has presented since March 2020. Koenemann resigned her position

on December 4th to return to her home state of Alaska as the Vice President of Programs in a Health Organization. With the resignation of Koenemann, Jordana Sabella has taken the helm as Interim Public Health Director and continues to lead this team to slow the spread of COVID.

Koenemann led the Public Health team in Pitkin County since 2017 overseeing the Department's core public health services as well as population-level work to promote health, health equity and prevent chronic disease by ensuring environments, policies, and systems that support wellness for everyone. That worked served as the starting point for being able to ramp up from 5 to 27 employees helping to keep people safe. A ramp-up of that magnitude is difficult in the best of times, but the staff were not only being on-boarded and learning a completely new job, they were also dealing with ever changing information about a virus that brought new lessons weekly and sometimes daily.

Pitkin County Commissioner, Patti Clapper, underscored their accomplishments saying, "It's a great team doing an amazing job during a very very difficult time." Clapper added, "Thanks to entire team and Sabella, for taking the lead and ramping up for the vaccinations yet to come."

And to Karen Koenemann thanks for all your hard work - remember it's dark in Alaska this time of year –



Summit County – Public Health Director, Amy Wineland

Earlier this year, Amy Wineland was recognized by the Colorado Public Health Association and the Colorado Health Foundation with the Exemplary Frontier Public Health Nurse Award as reported in the [Summit Daily](#). The award is given to one public health nurse each year for demonstrating exemplary service to a rural Colorado. This award demonstrated the overall superior performance of Wineland -both before and during – COVID-19.

Having worked in the Summit County Health department for 20 years, she thrived for years in a largely quiet role, doing good work anonymously behind the scenes.

Suddenly to be thrust to the forefront of leadership for the county for months, being placed in a very bright and uncomfortable spotlight was not something she sought. But like most Public

Health Directors, she has adapted to being in the arena every day – effectively and wisely making decisions on behalf of her community.

Of the pandemic, she told Libby Stanford of the Summit Daily, “It’s like waking up in your worst nightmare. It’s the perfect storm. It’s one of those things where you’re really just functioning on adrenalin when it starts, and we’re not out of the woods yet.”

Wineland has struggled with the weight of making decisions affecting both people’s lives and their livelihoods, acknowledging that the burden has taken a heavy toll on many people in her same field. Even while there is external pressure, she remarked that having the backing of her team is essential and, “gives us a lot of pride in our health department, knowing we have overall support for what we’re accomplishing.”

According to Summit County Commissioner, Karn Stiegelmeier, “Amy Wineland has captained the ship of Summit County’s COVID-19 response with courage, steadiness, compassion and unwavering dedication to the health of our community. We are so grateful to have such a remarkable leader on our team during these unprecedented challenges.”

Like her colleagues, Wineland has performed at a sustained high-levels just like the COVID super-hero she is.

NOTE: NWCCOG does not have an official “Person of the Year” award, nor are there any plastic trophies or plaques to distribute. As an organization that supports public leaders in local government, we thought this was an excellent opportunity to give some positive acknowledgement of what amazing public servants we have in our region, and how they have risen to this crisis. Across the country, public health officials and other civil servants have been under attack for doing their jobs this year, many of them are burning out, being fired for their decisions or just throwing in the towel. It is hard to blame them. Runners up this year for NWCCOG Persons of the Year would be County Clerks and their election teams who have also had unusually toxic exposure from the public this year, and not far behind that Executive level management teams who would be the first to defer credit to others across their organizations. It has been a rough year, we are still in the middle of the COVID crisis. We are grateful to you each for your service.

NWCCOG thanks Jill Ryan and her staff for providing the guest introduction, and for her stellar leadership hailing from our region to help steer the State of Colorado through this pandemic. She, too, is an NWCCOG Person of the Year.

Best wishes to each of our Persons of the Year for 2020. We wish each recipient, their families and their teams a healthy and less eventful 2021.

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