

Senate Health and Human Services Committee

Sophie Walsh 271-3469

SB 251, establishing a commission to study the delivery of public health services through regional public health networks and the continued development of coordinated responses to public health incidents and emergencies in New Hampshire.

Hearing Date: March 5, 2025

Members of the Committee Present: Senators Rochefort, Avard, Birdsell, Prentiss and Long

Members of the Committee Absent: None

Bill Analysis: This bill reestablishes the commission to study the delivery of public health services through regional public health networks and the continued development of coordinated responses to public health incidents and emergencies in New Hampshire.

Sponsors:
Sen. Prentiss

Who supports the bill: Sen. Prentiss, Rep. Janet Lucas, Abby Rogers (DHHS), John Klunk, Oliver Matte, and Hannah Willcutt.

Who opposes the bill: Laura Condon and Jillian Haffner.

Who is neutral on the bill: Stephanie Locke (DHHS).

Summary of testimony presented:

Senator Suzanne Prentiss, Senate District 5

- Senator Prentiss explained that this bill is seeking to re-establish a commission to study the delivery of public health services through the regional public health networks and the development of continued coordinated responses to public health incidents and emergencies in New Hampshire.
- Senator Prentiss began working on this issue when she first came to the Senate, but there has only been one full year of working on this as a group.
- There are thirteen regional public health networks in New Hampshire. They are largely used to assess public health and respond to needs, as they consider the needs of the community and what public issues or crises are arising in their respective communities.

- This is currently being delivered through a system without a sustainable, robust funding stream.
- Senator Prentiss explained that the prior commission needed to understand the different public health networks and all the departments they intersected with.
- The commission saw over twenty presenters and assessed the historical set-up of this system.
- During this process, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) launched an independent, related assessment to complement the work done by the commission. However, the commission did not receive the assessment until four months before their deadline and were not able to adequately compare results and make recommendations.
- Senator Prentiss emphasized that the Department and commission worked closely together, and the issue was the size and scope of subject matter.
- The Commission made a basic series of recommendations, and the number one recommendation is that this work needs to continue. They requested an extension, and this legislation will honor that, as the commission expired under the old statute.
- Senator Prentiss explained that no general funds are involved in this; while grant funds are used, they can limit scope. Regional public health networks must find funding sources from grant related projects in order to continue their work.

Abby Rogers & Stephanie Locke, Department of Health and Human Services

- Ms. Rogers introduced herself as the Legislative Liaison for the Division of Public Health Services.
- Ms. Locke introduced herself as the Bureau Chief of the Bureau of Emergency Preparedness, Response & Recovery. The Bureau oversees the thirteen regional public health networks.
- The current legislation being proposed seems to have a very similar scope of work to the previous commission.
- Regional public health networks serve as a liaison and champion for their communities.
- They serve as a resource for information sharing with partner agencies.
- They play a role in substance misuse prevention by creating access and opportunities for these services.
- They work on community health improvement plans in collaboration with local health care systems.
- The Department is happy to serve as a resource for the proposed commission in exploring services and looking for sustainable ways to continue the program.

- Senator Rochefort asked if regional public health networks investigate concerns such as potential cancer clusters, or if that falls under the purview of the Department.
- Ms. Locke explained that regional public health networks are part of the conversation, but they do not lead the investigation independently. They serve as a resource to community partners by sharing information from the Department and sharing feedback to the Department.
- Senator Rochefort clarified that community partners would contact the Department, and the investigation would thus be carried out.
- Ms. Locke confirmed and emphasized this collaboration allows the Department to have a community-level perspective.
- Senator Rochefort asked what role community partners would have in investigating something such as a cancer cluster.
- Ms. Locke explained that health officers play a role by working alongside regional public health networks.
- She emphasized that this is connecting the right partners to the right agency, given the outbreak being investigated.
- Senator Rochefort asked if each community has a liaison or if each of the regional public health networks handle concerns.
- Ms. Locke explained there is one liaison for each regional public health network, so every community within New Hampshire has representation through their regional public health network.
- She emphasized the importance of local health officers and regional public health networks working together to create a communication mechanism between the State and community partners.
- Senator Prentiss explained that when regional public health networks were established, they looked at hospital service areas, emergency medical service regions, and other pre-established regional networks to align communities of interest within geographical areas already working together. This allows every municipality to have a voice in the network, while working with one person who represented them, set up the contract, and ran day-to-day business.
- Senator Avard confirmed that this is funded through grants, and Ms. Locke confirmed that it is funded through federal grants from several federal partner agencies.
- Senator Avard asked if there are any strings attached to these grants.
- Ms. Locke explained that each grant has a scope of services that they are required to meet. They are careful in analyzing every opportunity to ensure that it aligns with the work public health networks are doing.

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Date Hearing Report completed: March 7, 2025