

Public health too big a priority to be cut

Proposed budget cuts at infectious diseases lab are shortsighted

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There's no question that government should be as efficient as possible. Just as families are doing across America, the federal government should stick to a budget by defining priorities and making judicious cuts.

That is why a proposed budget cut for a Fort Collins lab of the Centers for Disease Control seems counterintuitive. At a time when concerns about pandemic flu, West Nile virus and other disease are growing, the federal government has chosen public health to shoulder such deep cuts. It is a decision that compels reconsideration.

President Barack Obama's proposed budget calls for reducing the Division of Vector-Borne Infectious Diseases from \$39 million to \$12 million - about a 70 percent budget cut. The deep cut could result in the loss of 100 jobs at state and county health departments across the country that are funded through the division.

For more than a decade, the Colorado congressional delegation fought hard to secure funding for the local CDC lab. Wayne Allard kept the issue at the forefront while he was a U.S. representative and senator, as did Reps. Bob Schaffer and Marilyn Musgrave. Now, Sens. Mark Udall and Michael Bennet have written a letter to Senate budget writers, as has Rep. Betsy Markey in the House, asking for reconsideration on the cuts. They are urged to keep a high profile on this issue.

Karl Moeller, executive director at the Washington, D.C.-based Campaign for Public Health, told the Coloradoan that public health is often a candidate for budget cuts because its impacts are not always immediate.

But placing such significant cuts on the Fort Collins lab is shortsighted.

"When a pandemic flu strikes but doesn't get a foothold because there's a vaccine available ... that means your vector-borne disease lab in Fort Collins is working," Moeller told the Coloradoan. "If you lay those folks off and they go to work for someone else, that institutional memory is gone. You can't just replace that."