

Detroit proposal calls for transforming health department into an institute

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By **Patricia Anstett**

Detroit Free Press Medical Writer

The City of Detroit is expected to propose replacing its health department with a public health institute to save money as it tries to come up with a 2012-13 budget that satisfies the consent agreement it has with the state.

The proposal, outlined in a document the Free Press obtained, was to be presented Thursday to the Detroit City Council. But on a day packed with other government business, the discussion was tabled.

Though other cities have set up similar institutes, Detroit's would be the first conversion from a public health department to an institute in a major American city, according to Vern Davis Anthony, a former Michigan health department director and a consultant on the project.

The document outlining the change said the institute would have a governing board with the city's health director serving as a board member.

The institute is expected to be funded much like the health department, with state, federal and foundation grants, Anthony said.

It would not, however, get an allocation from the city as the current department does. That allocation was about \$10 million last year.

The institute would continue to offer most of the city's health programs, such as immunizations, restaurant inspections and maintenance of vital records, Anthony said. Still to be decided is how Detroit would oversee the health department's animal-control division, she said.

The replacement of the Detroit Department of Health and Wellness Promotion, which provides services to more than 200,000 Detroiters each year, would eliminate about 400

permanent and contractual jobs, Anthony said. Workers can apply for jobs at the Institute for Population Health, as the nonprofit agency will be named, Anthony said. The positions could be nonunion and have more limited retirement and health benefits, she said. The arrangement would save Detroit money because the city no longer would have to help offset labor costs for workers.

Anthony said that although final figures are not available, she expects that the institute could employ about 250 workers. As many as one-third of the city's 400 health department workers are eligible to [retire](#), she said.

Mayor Dave Bing has proposed shaving \$250 million from a \$1.2-billion general fund budget by cutting nearly 2,600 city workers, eliminating or merging departments and privatizing some services.

Jean Chabut, deputy director of the state health department, said the health department proposal "is a very significant transformational change" that would let the city arrange health services more efficiently.

Dr. Herb Smitherman Jr., assistant dean for community and urban health at Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center, said that given Detroit's [financial](#) problems, "We need to find ways to keep these very necessary resources in our city and in our communities."

Contact Patricia Anstett: 313-222-5021 or panstett@freepress.com