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Mayors' group makes sure Appalachian Ohio's voice is heard

By **Mary Beth Lane**

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ATHENS — Mayors from a stretch of Appalachian Ohio have been meeting for 20 years to exchange advice on everything from economic development strategies to sharing snow-removal equipment, but now they are broadening their scope.

The Mayors' Partnership for Progress is taking on more policy issues.

For example, the 13-county consortium of mayors in southeastern and southern Ohio wrote to Gov. John Kasich and the director of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services recently seeking \$12 million from approximately \$200 million in unobligated federal funds for the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program, or TANF. The group wants to use the money to start two localized programs to help poor households in the region pay their water bills and get help stocking up on essentials such as diapers, first-aid supplies, soap, toothpaste and feminine hygiene products.

The group is all about regional politics, not partisan politics, said organization president Gary Goosman, the mayor of Amesville in Athens County.

Democrats and Republicans in the group work together to promote the shared interests of their communities, trying to make sure the voice of Appalachian Ohio is heard at the Statehouse when policy decisions are being debated.

"This group is about bipartisanship and getting solutions," Goosman said.

The partnership was organized in 1996, and signed an agreement with Ohio University to provide technical assistance. It became a nonprofit organization in 2003, and today it works with the university's Voinovich School of Leadership

and Public Affairs to carry out its motto: "Providing leaders from small, rural communities a stronger, regional voice."

The Voinovich School, celebrating its 10th anniversary this year and named for George V. Voinovich, the late former Ohio governor and U.S. senator and an Ohio University alumnus, helps identify speakers and collect information for the topics the mayors discuss at their monthly meetings. Topics frequently include state-level initiatives or legislation that might have an impact on local communities, said the Voinovich School's Robert Gordon, who serves as coordinator to the mayors group.

Although the Ohio Municipal League represents the general interests of cities and villages at the Statehouse, groups such as the Mayors' Partnership focus on more specialized interests.

Urban mayors also have organized. The Ohio Mayors Alliance, a bipartisan coalition representing the state's largest cities, including Columbus, Dublin and Grove City in central Ohio, was formed last year to bring a more unified voice to advocate for urban interests at the Statehouse.

Sometimes their interests converge: Both the urban mayors and their rural brethren in the Mayors' Partnership are concerned about the opioid crisis and the cuts to local government funding by the state. The Mayors' Partnership unsuccessfully pressed Kasich in a letter in December to restore state local government funding to pre-2012 levels.

Mostly, though, the 70 or so rural mayors who are members of the group concentrate on trying to solve problems common to their region, where poverty and jobless rates are higher than the statewide averages.

"Oftentimes there's not an understanding of the challenges we face," Goosman said. "We need to be a player at the table."

For example, said Goosman, whose village of about 180 residents lacks internet access except for one Wifi hotspot at the local Grange Hall, "I think we will, more and more, get involved in (advocating for) broadband access. How are we going to have economic development if we don't have broadband? I'm trying to get young families to move into Amesville. If I don't have internet access, who's going to move there? It reduces the appeal to young families."

Jack Frech, a longtime anti-poverty activist who is a VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) worker based at the Voinovich School and assigned to the Mayors' Partnership since retiring as director of the Athens County Job and Family Services office, helped develop the proposals to use TANF money to help poor families in new ways.

One proposal calls for distributing \$8 million among Job and Family Services offices in the 13-county region to make one-time payments to water service providers to cover unpaid bills owed by low-income households with children. There are subsidies to help poor people pay for other utilities, such as heating, but there aren't any for water and sewer services, Frech said.

The other proposal calls for spending \$4 million in the region, through the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, to provide low-income families with essential non-food products such as diapers and soap in addition to the food they currently receive through the food pantry distribution system.

"They certainly have the money," Frech said of the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. "Do they see this as enough of a priority to let go of some of the money is another issue."

Officials are reviewing the proposals, department spokesman Bret Crow said.

mlane@dispatch.com

[@MaryBethLane1](#)