

Ambulance staff wages discussed at commissioners' meeting

The Clark County Ambulance staff attended the January 17 meeting of the Clark County Commissioners to discuss concerns about wages.

Regarding the wages, there were a few different areas of concern. The first being the full time staff making minimum wage, the second being special events pay and the third being EVOC driver pay.

The ambulance staff report, breaking down their hourly wage, was approximately \$9.31 per hour. Current minimum wage for the state of South Dakota is \$10.80. The ambulance staff scheduling differs from most full-time jobs as they are on call/duty for 24 hour periods for 15 days a month. Overtime does not happen until day 16, no matter the amount of hours worked.

The Clark Ambulance has had difficulty finding qualified individuals to employ locally, so most of the current staff live outside of the community. During a 24 hour shift, staff are required to be within two

miles of city limits.

Ambulance staff proposed a 17% increase, bringing their hourly wage to \$10.88/hour. There was heated discussion which resulted in the hourly wage issue being tabled, to be discussed at a later meeting. The commissioners will look into options to increase wages and where the increase can possibly be supplemented from, including the potential of raising current rates on services provided by the ambulance.

According to ambulance staff, they sometimes need to reach out to extra drivers to help cover when someone is sick or when there is a call that requires an extra staff member in the back of the ambulance. And, they say, the shift can require the volunteer or EVOC driver to remain in city limits and can dictate some of the recreational activities they can participate in, and the pay is not enough to encourage that.

Another issue that was rolled

into the discussion was special events pay. Special events consist of local football games, rodeos and other community events that may require emergency medical services to be on stand-by. While the special events take place, there are still full-time staff on duty, so the event would require alternate staff. According to ambulance staff, the pay was also not sufficient to entice qualified individuals to work the events.

After discussion, the commissioners and ambulance staff came to the conclusion that EVOC drivers and special event pay will change to \$90.00 for the first three hours, with \$10.00/hour for any additional hours over the initial three. In addition to the hourly pay, if a run must be made during the special event or the EVOC shift, the staff would be paid \$60.00 per run.

Commissioners had some discussion about researching what other communities charge for certain services to find a way to create funding

for the proposed changes.

Present were Clark County Commissioners Wallace Knock, Sara Gjerde, Chris Sass, Terry Schlagel and Francis Hass, Clark County Auditor Chris Tarbox; Clark County Sheriff Tad Heaton and Deputy Lindsey Steifel; Clark County Treasurer Kay Mahlen, City police officer Jeremy Wellnitz; and ambulance staff: Randy Angermeier, John Birnall, Justin Bowers, Bob Koistinen and Drey Reihe.

WEATHER

Robert Cole - Official
Weather Observer

	HI	LO	PR
January 17.....	30	19	0.03
January 18.....	23	17	0
January 19.....	24	18	0
January 20.....	22	14	0
January 21.....	22	16	0
January 22.....	23	3	0
January 23.....	24	6	0
2023 precipitation to date			0.25
2022 precipitation to date			0.30



Diane Spieker recently attended the South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems Awards Banquet in Pierre, where she was selected as the recipient of the 2023 Spirit of Rural Water award.

The Spirit of Rural Water award recognizes exceptional rural water advocates that stand out from the pack because of their commitments to rural water issues and their passion for the job.

Spieker is pictured above with her Spirit of Rural Water Award. She was also named Office Manager of the Year in 1991 and again in 2009.

Spieker retires after 35 years at Clark Rural Water

Clark resident Diane Spieker has officially retired after 35 years of employment with Clark Rural Water.

Spieker began her employment with Clark Rural Water as Office Manager in 1988. Hiring manager for the company at that time was Anders Christensen, who was later replaced by Duane Stokes. The manager position is currently held by Terry Kaufman. Spieker compliments the direction of all three of the managers stating she has much respect for each of them and their great management over the years.

Throughout Spieker's employment with Clark Rural Water, the company has seen many changes, including growth from 450 accounts to over 1,300 services in six towns. Another big change during her tenure was the incorporation of Quickbooks accounting from double entry accounting, which was all hand written and the implementation of a new water billing system.

In addition to the managers Spieker worked with at Clark Ru-

Diane Spieker
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How to Kill a Mockingbird performed at region competition

The Clark High School One-Act play cast and crew head to Watertown today to perform at the Region 6B competition.

On Sunday, they put on a public performance of *How to Kill a Mockingbird* by Bradley Walton in the Clark High School Gym. The play is about five students meeting to work on a group English project regarding their assigned reading of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

None of the students had read or even seen a copy of the book leading them to assume their project was to explain different methods to kill a mockingbird.

The crowd engaged in laughter in many moments of the play that offered outlandish suggestions and reasoning behind the suggestions.

Pictured above on the left from left to right are Leah Nelson as Aubrey, Olivia Fuller as Blair, Nevaeh Rusher as Kerry and Aleisha Naze as Ja-



mie. Pictured on the right are Rusher and Madison Pickrel, who played Dusty in the play.

Students not pictured, along with their roles include: Marlee Bowers as Senior Citizen and the English teacher's mother, Lily Ingraham as the waitress and English teacher's daughter, Brianna Dale as Mrs. Conrad, the English teacher and extras, Kaden Janisch, Raigan Flatten and Alivia Gehrke.

There were several students who assisted behind the scenes to help make the play happen. The set crew consisted of Abigail Reil, Logan Parker, Matthew Bachelor and Kooper Rahm. Lights and sound were ran by Waylan Olson. The play was directed by Jill Rathe.

Teacher numbers across South Dakota continue to decrease

Stu Whitney
South Dakota News Watch

Concern over the future of the teaching profession in South Dakota has led to more aggressive efforts by education officials to train and inspire a new generation of classroom leaders, with particular emphasis on elementary school classrooms.

The push comes as kindergarten through 12th grade teacher shortages worsen across the state, a trend driven by below-average salaries and dissatisfaction in the teaching ranks following the difficulties of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recent politicization of social studies standards and crack-down on so-called "inherently divisive" or race-based curricula under Gov. Kristi Noem.

Noem proposed a 5% increase in state aid to education for the 2024 fiscal year as part of her \$7.2 billion budget plan, on the heels of a 6% increase in 2023.

That would put \$24 million in new money into public schools for the 2023-24 school year, 44% less than the nearly \$43 million in new funding allocated in the 2022-23 school year, according to the Associated School Boards of South Dakota. School districts can determine

how much to allocate for salaries, but the money is also needed for expenses such as utility costs, food services, transportation, technology and extracurricular activities.

State Rep. Linda Duba, D-Sioux Falls, who serves on the House Appropriations Committee, told News Watch that she plans to work with fellow legislators to push for more education funding in the 2024 budget to help recruit and retain teachers and meet the demands of inflation. The former teacher expressed concern for the profession amid the current political and cultural climate in South Dakota.

"An element of trust and respect has been lost," Duba said. "There are a lot of like-minded folks who understand what undervaluing teachers and setting low-budget targets has done to state education over the last four or five years."

There were 176 statewide teacher openings at the end of December 2022, compared to 111 at the end of December 2021, a result of teacher retirements but also a rise in K-12 enrollment in South Dakota from 128,000 to 141,000 students over the past decade. The current openings include 36 in special education and 34 in elementary education.

The state's largest school district,

Sioux Falls, had 25 open teaching positions in June 2022, according to Assistant Superintendent Jamie Nold.

"We're getting calls from schools looking for teachers in the middle of the year," said Amy Schweinle, dean of the University of South Dakota School of Education. "These are unprecedented times, and it seems like elementary education is one of the biggest needs."

Administrators say chronic vacancies can erode the educational experience due to schools having to combine classrooms (increasing student-to-teacher ratio) or hire less-qualified applicants to fill positions. Sioux Falls has dealt with some classroom openings by hiring long-term substitute teachers or bringing back retired teachers to fill the void, Nold said. If the current teacher workforce and student population trends hold true, the student-to-teacher ratio could rise to 20:1 by 2025, above the target ratio of 14:1 in South Dakota.

Wade Pogany, executive director of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, said the number of statewide teacher vacancies is greater than 2015, when then-Gov. Dennis Daugaard formed the Blue Ribbon Task Force that spurred

a legislative effort to reform the school funding formula and support teacher salary increases with a half-penny sales tax increase.

Despite those efforts, South Dakota's average teacher salary of \$49,547 currently ranks 50th in the nation, according to the National Education Association, well below the national average of \$65,293 and neighboring states Minnesota (\$66,561), Wyoming (\$60,234), Iowa (\$58,831), Nebraska (\$56,463), North Dakota (\$54,837) and Montana (\$53,133). South Dakota ranks 39th in per-student state spending at \$11,102, according to the NEA.

The Sioux Falls schools increased the average teacher salary within the district from \$53,200 to \$57,160 over the past year to try to attract and retain employees, as well as seeking to expand benefits and insurance programs. Some of the top school districts in average teacher pay according to the South Dakota Teacher Compensation Review Board's 2021 report were Brandon Valley (\$73,177), Yankton (\$72,687), Huron (\$66,723) and Mitchell (\$66,555).

But, with the national inflation

S.D. Teachers
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Students thank Amber Nickeson for service at special send-off

Last Thursday, the Clark Elementary School students and staff lined the halls of the school with decorated signs to honor their classmates' mother as her family prepares for her deployment.

Pictured above is Amber Nickeson accompanied by her sons Tyler (third grade on the left) and Kaden (first grade on the right) as they walked through halls receiving many thank-yous, high fives and hugs from students, thanking her for her service and wishing her well as she prepares to deploy for the next 400-plus days.

Nickeson is a Staff Sergeant with the United States Army. Nickeson has been working as a nurse at the Sanford Clinic in Clark. Nickeson is married to Clark City Police Officer Nate Nickeson, and they have two sons, Tyler and Kaden pictured above.