

Fired jail administrator vows to fight

BY **TOM STANKARD,**
tstankard@ashlanddailypress.net

The Ashland County Jail administrator who said new Sheriff Brian Zupke abruptly fired her for no reason in January isn't going down without a fight.

Several of Kim Lavoisier's friends and family members attended Tuesday's Ashland County Board meeting to voice their support for her and to rail against Zupke's decision.

Gigi Cloud, manager of Chequamogon Family Restaurant, said she was shocked and disgusted when she learned of her friend Lavoisier's demotion and subsequent termination after 22 years of service to the county.

"Twenty-two years of her life dedicated to the county and this is how she's treated. No explanation. The disrespect and treatment of the long-term employee is seriously disheartening. She loses her job and is thrown out like a piece of trash," she said.

Ashland County Corporation Counsel Max Lindsey said Lavoisier was not terminated for no reason, but he declined to give specifics.

"There does not need to be a reason. It is legal to terminate someone in an at-will state, but that's not what happened here," he said.

Zupke took office Jan. 1 and told Lavoisier on Jan. 19 that he was demoting her from lieutenant — the jail's top administrative post paying about \$62,000 a year — to a line corrections officer paying about \$50,000. On Jan. 27 the county told her she was being terminated, with no communication between those dates, she said.

Lavoisier was promoted to lieutenant during a difficult time for the county following the death of the last administrator, Lt. Tony Jones, Lavoisier's mom, Mary Jane Grande, said.

During her time in charge, Lavoisier took several steps to have the facility encourage inmates to change their lives, she said. She made it more aesthetically pleasing by having an inmate paint inspirational murals on walls, and upgraded the library with new books, Grande said.

In Lavoisier's place, Zupke appointed Kyle Cadotte, a detective, as interim jail administrator. Lavoisier told committee members that



Former Ashland County Jail Administrator Kim Lavoisier, in yellow, speaks to the Ashland County Board Tuesday. Her family and friends also spoke on her behalf about the way she was terminated after 22 years of service to the county. (Tom Stankard/Staff photo)

Cadotte is Zupke's wife's cousin and he has no experience managing a jail.

The county is waiting to see if Lavoisier files a grievance before naming a permanent replacement, County Administrator Dan Grady said.

Lavoisier's sister, Donna Sechen, told board members Tuesday that in her work as a medical technologist at Memorial Medical Center, she often has contact with police officers. Several county deputies have told her they are considering looking for other work because they fear being treated like Lavoisier, she said.

"They are worried that, yes, I am doing a good job, but what happens tomorrow or next week?" she said.

Lavoisier said she filed an open-records request for access to her personnel file, which revealed nothing about why she was terminated.

"One verbal reprimand from 20 years ago. However, I do have a letter of appreciation given to me by (former) Sheriff Mick Brennan before he left," she said.

Lavoisier was fired as the county is struggling to find enough correctional officers and recently increased pay by \$2 an hour to attract workers.

A person with Lavoisier's experience should be an asset to the sheriff's office as it tries to meet those challenges, Grande said.

"She has great a deal of experience, not only with the prisoners, but also with the parents and with the sheriff that has now retired," she said. "This was the biggest mistake that could have been made and I believe it should be brought to light — if not through this county board, then through some legal action."

Rick Nettleton, a local real estate broker who used to work with Lavoisier, again raised the question of whether Zupke can even legally hold the sheriff's job. He said Zupke remains a Bayfield County resident living in Mason, though he bought a small home in Mellen to qualify to be on the ballot.

Zupke's property tax statements were addressed to his Bayfield County home, not the Mellen address, Nettleton said.

"I think you people should really be looking at who should be reprimanded and it's not Kim Lavoisier," he said.

Grady said Zupke is registered to vote in Mellen and his driver's license has a Mellen address.

The board did not respond to Lavoisier's comments or her supporters Tuesday.

Ashland County Board Chairman Richard Pufall declined to comment after the meeting, referring questions to Lindsey.

Lavoisier said she plans to fight her termination. She did not provide specifics, but did say she has hired an attorney in the matter.

Health emergency to end in May

Curtailed benefits will hit many local families

BY **RICK OLIVO**
rolivo@ashlanddailypress.net

Although more than 500 Americans a day are continuing to die of COVID-19 and its complications, the national pandemic emergency declared in January of 2020 will come to an end on May 11.

And while the masks and hand-sanitizer may be going away, local health officials said some vital services and funds will, too. Local residents will lose Medicaid money and may have to pay out-of-pocket for COVID tests that until now were free. They also will see cuts to hospital Medicare payments for treating COVID patients.

Those cuts come as expanded FoodShare benefits for about 400,000 Wisconsin residents come to an end on Feb. 28.

Bayfield County Health Department Director and Health Officer Sara Wartman said her primary concern is for the thousands of Wisconsin residents who will lose Medicaid access.



Wartman

"Because of the Medicaid unwinding in Wisconsin, there may be many folks who may remain eligible for Medicaid, but will have to reapply for it," she said. "I think some people will fall through the cracks."

Wartman said millions of people were able to enroll in Medicaid relatively easily throughout the pandemic.

"Now they are looking at from 5 to 14 million Americans who may lose their health insurance for low-income persons," she said.

Those recipients will have to be recertified for Medicaid under the more stringent ordinary process, which could result in many people losing insurance and having more health problems because they put off seeking medical care until it becomes an emergency.

Wartman said the Health Department will continue providing vaccinations and COVID testing, but just how long that will continue is an open question. According to the Wall Street Journal, both Pfizer and Moderna executives have indicated that they might charge up to \$130 a dose for COVID vaccines once federal payments for vaccinations end. Free supplies of the Paxlovid anti-viral pill also likely will end because Congress has so far declined to continue federal funding.

"I think in the clinical aspect,

if you are going to Essentia or St. Luke's, you are probably going to eventually have to pay for COVID tests, paying for COVID treatments," Wartman said.

Ashland County Health Officer Liz Sztot said her department will work to continue its existing programs, following up with patients who have tested positive for COVID and offering educational outreach.



Sztot

She too said the cutbacks of FoodShare benefits and Medicaid are top concerns.

But her office still has free COVID tests available and updated COVID booster vaccines.

"We plan on continuing a small supply of those," Sztot said.

This week marked the first time in nearly two years that all of Wisconsin was enjoying low community-transmission levels of the virus — though it still is active.

"Over the past three weeks, we've had 17 lab-confirmed cases. At one point in time, even a year ago, we were having 17 cases in a single day," Sztot said.

The waning pandemic allows the Ashland Health Department to again take up programs that it set aside to focus on COVID, Sztot said.

Still, the ending of the emergency declaration could be difficult for many residents, she said.

"These benefits have been ongoing for the past two years. For people who still need that level of benefits but may not qualify for them anymore, it is definitely going to be a hardship," Sztot said.



Mesik

Local Women Infants and Children Program Director Caloney Mesik said her department also will be affected. Some emergency procedures, including remote visits, will continue until August.

"It is beginning to look like remote visits are the wave of the future," Mesik said. "They have the choice of coming in if they want, but the option to have a remote online visit is there."

Mesik predicted that there would be increased usage of WIC with the paring of FoodShare funds.

The WIC program provides fruits and vegetables, whole grains, milk, cheese, yogurt, peanut butter, canned beans and peas, and for some families, canned fish.

"It's a really nice food package," Mesik said.

3 things to do this weekend

BY **ASHLAND DAILY PRESS**

The sun is warming and love is in the air:

• Y'all-Entines's Party
When: Saturday starting at 6 p.m.

Where: Authentic Superior: 15175 Spruce Tree Dr., Herbster
What to expect: Celebrate the community with an evening featuring a live floral bar, photo-art booth, valentine-making activities, music, dancing and more.

• Snow Shelter Event
When: All weekend
Where: Howl Adventure Center:



The Blue Canvas Orchestra will perform Sunday afternoon at The Backstage. (File photo)

35265 S. Highway J in Bayfield
What to expect: The event starts Friday night with a clinic

on how to build a snow shelter, then teams or individuals have the weekend to complete a shelter. On Sunday afternoon, the Howl judges will tour the shelters and prizes from vendors will be awarded.

• Love Is... Featuring the Blue Canvas Orchestra
When: Sunday starting at 2 p.m.
Where: The Backstage: 84810 Highway 13, Bayfield

What to expect: Led by long-time Blue Canvas Orchestra performer Tom Mitchell, this special Valentine's performance will feature Ed Willett, Danielle Diamond and Nate Bean.

Zupke irks committee with promotion of new chief deputy

BY **ASHLAND DAILY PRESS**

Ashland County Sheriff Brian Zupke has run afoul of the county's law enforcement committee by appointing a new chief deputy without the committee's approval.



Zupke

Zupke nominated Sgt. Nate Deegan to be his second in command, a move approved Tuesday by the County Board.



Deegan

But Ashland County Property Management and Law Enforcement Committee Chairwoman Laura Nagro said her committee should have been involved in the process.

Nagro said candidates for the position — second in command to Zupke — should have been brought

in for interviews before her committee, which then would have made a recommendation to the County Board.

That's the process followed in the past, including in 2021, when Zupke was promoted to chief deputy under then-Sheriff Mick Brennan, Nagro said.

Ashland County Administrator Dan Grady said the five-member Ashland County Executive Committee that handles human resource matters this time took over the process, voting unanimously to recommend Deegan for approval by the County Board.

Though it was customary for the law enforcement committee to be involved in the interview process, nothing in state law or local ordinances requires it, he said.

Zupke said he nominated Deegan based on his track record with the department.

"He has over 20 years experience. He's been a sergeant for 14 years and he's been involved in major

investigations throughout his entire career. He's been a trainer, instructor, all of that. He goes above and beyond the average deputy," he said.

Deegan will make just under \$68,000 at his new

position, slightly less than he made as a sergeant, when he made an annual income of just over \$68,000 because of his time with the department.

County Board member Bradley Ray said he trusts

Zupke's recommendation and the county officials

involved in the selection process.

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