

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

Can the exhausted, angry people of Ottawa County learn to live together?

Adeline Hambley's employees at a county health department in Michigan saw her as their protection from political interference by conservative Christians on the county board. Then the board offered her \$4 million to quit.



By [Greg Jaffe](#)

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WEST OLIVE, Mich. — All year, the new conservative Christian majority on the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners had been searching for a way to get rid of Adeline Hambley, who ran the west Michigan county's health department. It wasn't as easy as it seemed.

They had discussed firing Hambley, whom they saw as an instrument of government tyranny. But her job came with protections, written into state law, that were intended to insulate her from political influence or retribution.

They had proposed paying Hambley \$4 million to leave. She accepted in early November. But the commissioners backed out a few days later when they learned that the payment could damage the county's bond rating and tank its finances.

Now it was Nov. 14. The commissioners huddled with their lawyers in a windowless conference room at the county's boxy, brick government complex. Hambley and her lawyer waited anxiously in a small room just down the hall. The two sides were stuck.

All over the country, deep partisan divisions were making it harder for American government to function and its citizens to coexist. The number of intractable disputes seemed to grow by the day: climate change, racial equity, gender-affirming care, guns, immigration, abortion. The battles were paralyzing Congress and pitting red and blue states against each other. Increasingly, they were consuming school boards and local government.

In Ottawa County, a fast-growing community of 300,000 along Lake Michigan, the nexus for so many of these ideological fights was the health department.

The hard-right Republicans on the 11-person county board swept into office last year after defeating more-moderate GOP incumbents in a primary. The old commissioners had for years focused on keeping taxes low and the county's biggest multinational employers happy. Their replacements reflected an increasingly populist and conspiratorial GOP — remade in the image of Donald Trump.

The fight for the soul of a conservative county

Washington Post reporters Greg Jaffe and Patrick Marley have made eight trips to Ottawa County, Mich., since fall 2022. They have documented the ways a tumultuous moment for the nation's politics and the Republican Party have shaken up this fast-growing, right-leaning county of about 300,000 people.



They complained that they couldn't trust Hambley. They accused her of supporting mask mandates and pushing coronavirus vaccines that they believed were unproven and possibly unsafe. They said her employees had encouraged dangerous, sexually perverse behavior by attending a local Pride festival, where they tested attendees for sexually transmitted diseases and administered the mpox vaccine.

Hambley insisted that her job wasn't to serve the board. It was her responsibility to look after the health and safety of all of the county's residents, regardless of their moral or political beliefs. "I want to work with the commissioners so we can protect the community," said the 44-year-old, who had sued the county to keep her position. "But I am not their subordinate."

Their latest, fruitless negotiating session was approaching the seven-hour mark on Nov. 14 when Doug Zylstra, the lone Democrat on the board and a strong backer of Hambley, suggested an option that only a few days earlier would have seemed unthinkable.

What if Hambley and the conservatives on the board tried to negotiate a temporary truce? No one was completely comfortable with the idea, but none of the commissioners rejected it. After a half-hour of talks, the commissioners had cobbled together a bare-bones proposal that would allow Hambley to keep her job and pay her about \$100,000 to cover her legal fees.

Zylstra sensed that Hambley would not accept it. She wanted the commissioners to acknowledge her independence and authority as county health officer. She needed guarantees that they wouldn't bully her staff or simply try to fire her again in a few weeks.

Still, Zylstra saw the board's offer as a small step forward — a rare glimmer of hope in an otherwise depressing and divisive year for the board and the county. The stalemate was finally forcing the two sides to wrestle with a question that for 11 months they had been unwilling to even consider: Amid all the rancor, could they somehow figure out a way to live together?

Paying a premium

The driving force behind the year-long effort to remove Hambley was Joe Moss, a 38-year-old newcomer to politics and the board chair.

Moss rarely talked about the actual work of county government: repairing roads, maintaining parks, inspecting restaurants and collecting taxes. Instead his public statements and social media posts described an epochal battle between Christian conservatives and powerful secular forces in the media, academia, government and the medical establishment that he said were trying to outlaw his faith and seize control of his community.

“Censorship, demonization and public intimidation of Conservatives have been the go-to method to obtain submission and silence,” Moss wrote in the midst of the board's standoff with Hambley and the health department.

A few days later, he shared a post that said: “Progressives are working hard to make unapologetic conservative Christianity unacceptable in the public life of our nation.”

“This is absolutely true,” he added.

Moss's posts echoed the messages he and his constituents were hearing regularly from their pastors on Sunday. And they mirrored the increasingly angry and apocalyptic rhetoric of national Republican leaders like Trump, who described his political enemies as “vermin,” often training his ire on the federal bureaucracy and its institutions.

“Either the deep state destroys America or we destroy the deep state,” the former president said.

In Ottawa County, Moss's battle began with the 100-person health department. Hours after taking office on Jan. 3, Moss and his allies on the board voted to demote Hambley and replace her with Nate Kelly, a safety manager at a local HVAC company who had gained prominence as a vaccine skeptic and critic of mask mandates.

The previous Republican-dominated board had appointed Hambley to her position in December 2022 after a months-long, nationwide search. They saw Hambley as a long-serving, reliable county employee. To Moss, she was a cog in a vast and unelected bureaucracy that included the World Health Organization, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services.

Moss declined to comment for this article but discussed the department's importance in an interview with a local right-wing talk-radio host. "In many ways, public health has been weaponized in the United States and outside the country," Moss told him. "And that's why we need people who are going to prioritize freedom and the Constitution. ... We should not have top-down governmental control making daily decisions for hundreds of thousands or millions of people."

Hambley sued the board in February to stop the conservative commissioners from demoting or replacing her. So Moss looked for other ways of limiting her and the department's power. In late August, Moss and the county administrator gave Hambley less than three days to slash the department's proposed 2024 budget in half, from \$17.4 million to \$9 million. The order came despite the county's growing tax revenue and flush coffers. Hambley said she tried to comply but quickly concluded it was not feasible.

In news releases and public statements, she warned that the cuts would damage the county's economy, endanger public safety and trigger a state takeover of the department. Moss and the board gradually backed off their most extreme demands. In late September, the commissioners authorized the department to spend \$14.4 million in 2024, down about 20 percent from the previous year's spending. On the night the budget passed, Moss accused Hambley of "inciting fear and panic in the community" with her warnings and initiated the formal process to fire her.

State law required the board to prove in a public hearing that Hambley was "incompetent" or had committed malfeasance. Current and former county employees testified over two days in late October about the chaotic budget process and the growing political pressure on county workers. When the hearing was done, the county's lawyers warned the commissioners that voting to fire Hambley carried risks. A judge could order the county to reinstate her and pay damages.

Moss and his allies on the board debated their options for several days before the two sides reconvened on Nov. 6 at the county government center. They first offered Hambley \$1.8 million to leave and drop her lawsuit. Hambley and her attorney countered with \$8 million, according to court documents. The back-and-forth negotiations continued for several hours. Near the end of the day, Hambley and her lawyer said she would take \$4.45 million to leave, though she didn't expect the board to accept.

The county's lawyers advised the commissioners that the proposed settlement was on the high end of what she might receive if she prevailed at trial. Hambley's annual salary and benefits amounted to about \$180,000. Several commissioners, who wanted to keep Hambley in the job, argued that the offer was exorbitant and unnecessary. A majority of the commissioners, though, wanted her gone.

The final decision on the proposed settlement fell to Moss. He had been saying for months that the nation's survival required "unapologetic" conservative leaders with "spines of steel." Now the moment had arrived for him to show he was that kind of leader.

Moss told the attorneys that he was "willing to pay a premium" to guarantee Hambley's departure, according to several people in the room. Sylvia Rhodea, the board's vice chair, suggested one last counter of \$4 million. Moss agreed. Soon the lawyers were walking the offer down the hall, where Hambley and her attorney were waiting.

A broken deal

Hambley had gone to the county government complex on the morning of Nov. 6 expecting that she would spend the day fighting to keep her job. She wasn't sure what to do when she saw the board's \$4 million counteroffer.

"I don't want to feel like I'm selling my soul in some way," she texted her husband.

The daughter of a machinist and a school bus driver, Hambley was the first in her family to graduate from college. She had started with the county two decades earlier as a restaurant and septic inspector, working her way up to the department's top job while raising three children, now 19, 17 and 12. That day, her husband was at their home — a small, muddy farm with chickens, goats and a pig named Waffles, who weighed several hundred pounds and slept in their front entryway.

"It's life changing for our family," she texted him. "What do you want me to do?" He told her to listen to her lawyer.

Hambley accepted the proposed settlement and the lawyers began working to finalize the language so that the commissioners could reconvene in a week and vote publicly on it.

A few days later, the deal fell apart. The county's lawyers told the board that the large payout could cause its insurer to drop the county's coverage, according to several commissioners who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal discussions. The county, in turn, could lose its AAA bond rating, driving up the costs that it, along with schools and townships throughout Ottawa, would incur to borrow money.

The county's lawyers emailed Hambley's attorney on Nov. 10 to say they had "run into problems" with the settlement.

On Nov. 14, everyone returned to the government center for another day of haggling. The board offered Hambley \$1 million to quit, the maximum its lawyers said the county could give her without putting its bond rating at risk. Hambley rejected it. The board floated Zylstra's idea of a truce, in which the board would pay some of Hambley's legal fees. She would drop her lawsuit and stay in the job without any protections. She turned down that proposal as well.

About 4 p.m., the talks ended for the day. Hambley headed to the health department to address her employees — nurses, social workers, health inspectors and epidemiologists — who had packed the office's main conference room. Many were wearing T-shirts bearing the slogan "Nevertheless, she persisted," in support of their boss.

To Moss and his supporters, Hambley was the vanguard of a national movement that was seeking to marginalize and silence Christian conservatives. To employees at the health department, she was their shield. She was fighting not just for them, but for embattled medical professionals across the state and the country. The Holland Sentinel, the local newspaper, had published the details of the \$4 million deal a few days earlier, before it had been withdrawn. For the workers in the room, the news that Hambley was willing to take money to leave was a gut punch; some said they had felt abandoned and betrayed.

Hambley told her employees that she had wanted to stay and fight. “I would love to keep being the county health officer,” she said. But a majority of the commissioners were determined to get rid of her.

If the board fired her, Hambley told her staff, she probably would have to fight for a year or longer in court before she could return to her job. Even if she prevailed, there were no guarantees that a judge would order the board to reinstate her.

Hambley and Marcia Mansaray, her deputy, described the proposed \$4 million settlement as a powerful deterrent that would clarify state law and send a message to other county commissions in Michigan that removing a health officer carried huge costs.

The employees began to ask questions. They wanted to know who would protect them if both Hambley and Mansaray were gone. Hambley replied that Gwen Unzicker, a physician who served as the department’s medical director, would fight to make sure their work met the standards of care.

They asked Hambley what she was hearing from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, which also had oversight responsibilities for the department. Initially, state officials had pressed Hambley to try to “find common ground” with the new commissioners. Lately, the response from state officials had been silence, she told the workers.

They asked about the HVAC safety manager whom the board hoped to put in charge of the department if Hambley departed. There wasn’t much she could tell them.

The hour-long session was nearing its end. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now,” an employee in the medical examiner’s office told Hambley. “Thank you for being willing to fight for us.” Hambley and Mansaray thanked their employees for their perseverance and tenacity. The room burst into applause that lasted for a couple of minutes.

When the cheering died down, the workers headed home. They described their state of mind in interviews as “anxious,” “uncertain,” “stressed” and “utterly exhausted.” Most doubted that Moss or his allies on the board would be willing to seek an acceptable compromise. Eventually, they would find a way to force Hambley out.

“To them the stakes are eternal,” Unzicker said. “There’s no middle ground. They seem to think what we’re doing is evil.”

The fallout grows

News of the scuttled \$4 million settlement spread quickly through the county. A few hours after Hambley had addressed her staff, the Ottawa County Patriots held a previously scheduled seminar at a local church. It was titled: “The Second Amendment: Under Attack and Fighting Back!”

Rebekah Curran, one of the new commissioners who had taken office in January, sat in the third pew from the front. When the presentation ended, several attendees circled around her, expressing shock that the county would offer Hambley so much money.

“Are they actually going to give her \$4 million?” asked an older man who wore a Navy veteran cap and balanced on a cane.

“If you give into one of them, you open the floodgates to them all!” warned a woman with an American flag scarf draped around her neck.

“I can’t believe numbers like that were even contemplated,” said a lawyer in a crisp Oxford shirt and khakis.

Curran told them she didn’t support the settlement and had planned to vote against it before it fell apart. “I don’t agree with it!” she said.

The board had spent more than 30 hours in open and closed session discussing what to do and seemed to have no workable answers. One of the commissioners resigned amid the standoff, citing “changes in his personal and professional life.” Six of the remaining 10 wanted to remove Hambley. Three were trying to find a way to keep her. Curran was somewhere in the middle. “I’m so tired of the political games on both sides,” she said.

The battle was affecting the health department’s ability to keep staff and deliver services. Since the beginning of the year, 24 employees — about a fifth of its workforce — had retired or left for other jobs, according to health department officials. In the five years before the pandemic, the department had averaged about eight departures a year.

One of those who quit in November was Matthew Allen, a supervisor in the department’s environmental division. He’d been with the county for 14 years and described himself as a devout Christian who home-schooled his children, voted for Trump and never got a coronavirus vaccine. “None of that mattered to [Hambley],” he said. “She was a wonderful leader.”

Allen said Moss’s interference had led him to leave the county for a state job. “There’s a line between government and religion, and when they get mixed up, you don’t get people making decisions for the good of the whole,” he said.

His and other departures from the environmental division were taking a toll, health department officials said. The wait time for septic inspections in the county had tripled since January to 30 days.

The turmoil had also upended Ottawa Food, a health department program that helped feed 22,000 low-income residents each year. The board in the fall had eliminated funding for the program's director, a health department employee who coordinated food assistance with 45 local nonprofits and food pantries. In November, amid the fight over Hambley's fate, the nonprofits that made up Ottawa Food's board announced they were suspending a program that provided aid to seniors and an initiative that supplied churches and food pantries with thousands of pounds of fresh produce.

Rhodea, the board's vice chair, accused the health department and its nonprofit partners of playing a "political game" with the program to discredit the commissioners. "We're committed to food security in this county," she said, "but we're not committed to dysfunction."

The nonprofits on the Ottawa Food board received nearly \$1 million from the county in 2023 to run food programs and assist farmers. At a board meeting in late November, Rhodea threatened to take some of that money and start a new county agency that would work more cooperatively with the commissioners. She didn't explain how the new agency would operate, but she did have a name for it: "The Department of Family Impact."

Moss, seated next to her, listened and nodded. "A Department of Family Impact sounds really good," he mused.

Stirrings of hope

The two weeks since Zylstra first raised the possibility of a truce had been turbulent for Hambley, the board and the entire county.

In late November, the 57-year-old Democrat called Hambley to discuss a matter related to the fight over the health department budget and the Ottawa Food program. After a few minutes, the conversation shifted to the negotiations with the board over her future.

"I'm feeling hopeful," he told Hambley.

"Why?" Hambley replied. "What's there to be hopeful about?"

Zylstra understood her pessimism. There had been stretches in the summer and fall when he'd felt he couldn't talk to Moss and the other conservatives on the board outside their regular meetings. He worried that they might take his words out of context and use them against him. The strains, he said, mirrored the county as a whole, which he described as "broken" before pausing to reconsider. "I don't want to say that," he continued. "We're separated into parts." The tension had also spread to his relationship with his sisters, who were strong supporters of Moss and his movement.

Yet Zylstra also believed there were reasons for optimism: The intervention by the courts had so far dissuaded the board from firing Hambley; hundreds of citizens had rallied to support her and the health department.

Shortly after the \$4 million settlement collapsed, Hambley's attorney, Sarah Howard, filed a motion asking a state circuit court judge to enforce it, arguing that the two sides had reached agreement on the "essential" terms before the commissioners decided to back out. The board's lawyers countered that the deal hadn't been finalized and that the commissioners hadn't voted publicly to accept it. Both steps were required by law before the settlement was complete, they said.

Judge Jenny L. McNeill, who had been dealing with the case for much of the year, scheduled a Jan. 19 hearing on the matter. In the interim, she urged the two sides to meet with a mediator and try to reach a deal.

"I think everyone — not just the parties, but the entire county — needs some resolution here," she said.

Zylstra understood that the mistrust and anger in the county weren't going to be resolved by mediation or even the courts. The divisions were real and deep.

Like many in Trump's Republican Party, Moss framed politics as a battle between good and evil. The nation's survival was at stake. Compromise was a sign of weakness and corruption. His perspective had inflamed passions across the county and upended the way the board operated. "We don't talk about whether we should plow the snow once or twice a day," Zylstra said. "Those are not our fights. Our fights are much larger."

But the past year and the standoff with Hambley had made it clear that there were limits to the board's power, limits that even Moss was being forced to acknowledge.

Zylstra thought that the court-imposed delay might allow emotions to cool. He believed that eventually the board and Hambley would be forced to recognize that their only viable option was coexistence. "An uneasy truce," Zylstra called it.

A trying year was drawing to a close. This was Zylstra's hope for the next one.

Patrick Marley contributed to this report.