



DATE: January 20, 2023
TO: Worcester Board of Health
FROM: Soloe Dennis, MS, MEP, Director
RE: WBOH Meeting/ WebEx Meeting Minutes for January 9, 2023

Meeting called to order at 6:30 PM

Welcome and Introductions

Members Present: Khanh-Van Tran, MD- De Facto Chairperson, Chareese Allen- Member, Gary Rosen- Member, Frances Anthes- Member

Staff Present: Michael Hirsh, MD, Medical Director; Matilde ‘Mattie’ Castiel, MD, Commissioner of HHS; Zachary Dyer, MS, PhD, Deputy Commissioner of HHS; Soloe Dennis, MS, MEP, Director of the Division of Public Health; Nikki Nixon, Chief of Data, Research, and Epidemiology

Review and Approve December Meeting Minutes

Gary Rosen motions to approve. Dr. Khanh-Van Tran seconds the motion. Minutes approved

COVID, FLU, RSV Updates

Presented by Dr. Michael Hirsh with slides and Mattie Castiel

- RSV cases have been dropping after it peaked around Christmastime.
- Flu peaked around Christmastime and has been steadily decreasing over the first week of January.
- Covid numbers are going up. New variant XBB 1 and XBB 1.1 account for about 80% of all COVID cases.
- About 250 million people in China have COVID, so there is concern about further spread.
- \$75.00 gift cards are still being offered at clinics as an incentive to get the vaccine.
- Dr. Castiel adds that numbers of
 - Frances Anthes asks how do we see this going forward? Dr. Hirsh says that it is difficult to make predictions. New variants continue to come from Europe and China. He does anticipate. Ms. Anthes asks if the people in China didn’t receive the vaccine or if the vaccines they did receive was just not strong enough, or both. Dr. Hirsh states that it is a combination of both. 33% vaccination rate in China and used an inferior vaccine model. Dr. Castiel adds that one of the things we have to work on is rebuilding trust with patients.
 - Gary Rosen talks about how many people in his friend group have not been feeling well. He doesn’t see many people wearing masks out and says that people

in general seem to all just be tired, but we need to encourage them to get the vaccines.

- Chareese Allen said we need to get the message back out there. She asks if they are working on a Flu and Covid joint vaccine. Says that people are still coming into the ER for one thing and finding out that they have COVID.
- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks what the mortality rate is on elderly or older adult patients. What are some new efforts we could do to battle the fatigue? Can we get new trusted ambassadors? Dr. Castiel says that she thinks we need to think of a new way to outreach into the communities. She also states that the mortality is up in the elder ages. Dr. Hirsh says that the bivalent booster has reduced the severity of symptoms about 30% in people who have received the booster versus those who have not.

Homelessness in Worcester

Presented by Dr. Mattie Castiel

- We thought that the number of unsheltered people in the summer (400) would double in the winter as it did in prior years.
- The numbers have increased but thankfully shelters have increased their capacity.
- On December 19th, HHS partnered with Open Sky to open Blessed Sacrament, a 60 bed shelter. Now looking for another shelter.
- People are still in encampments. The goal has been to provide medical services to unhoused people.
- Numbers will continue to increase as they go hand in hand with addiction.
- Numbers won't decrease until people are housed
 - Mr. Rosen says that he went to the Blessed Sacrament to give the people the opportunity to share concerns and ask questions about the city. Housing is still a major issue and everyone really needs a healthy place to live.
 - Ms. Allen says that during these cold months if someone comes into the ER that is homeless, they try to keep them as long as they can so they don't have to go back on the streets.
 - Ms. Anthes commends Dr. Castiel for her efforts. She asks how many people are we concerned about being unhoused. Dr. Castiel says she's likely concerned about 75 people, but she doesn't have exact numbers because many are in encampments. She thinks that we need to get our community to 'row in the same direction' and understand that homelessness is a part of all of us. Providing medical and addiction care to the homeless population.
 - Dr. Tran asks what practical things can she should tell a homeless patient what they should do? Dr. Castiel says that a problem they have with the shelters is the hospitals discharging homeless individuals to shelters, often without even calling. We need further discussions regarding shelters in smaller towns that may not have all beds filled. Also setting up follow-up care at the shelters.

WRTA and the Free Ride Program

Presented by Gary Rosen

- The WRTA is one of the leaders across the country in the Zero Fare movement. 2.5 years, by a vote of advisory board, and they agreed to extend it until the end of FY.

- Zero Fare will be on the WRTA annual budget hearing agenda in February. He's hopeful that we can continue with it for another year.
- Worcester is one of only a handful of cities across the country that has had zero fare buses since the start of the pandemic.
 - Ms. Anthes does believe that the bus fare is a public health issue as the free fare has really helped many people get to and from medical appointments. Mr. Rosen said that he would love for the Board to make a statement of support.
 - Ms. Allen agrees that it is an important asset to the community and would also be willing to endorse it. She would like to see the ridership from before COVID and currently.
 - Dr. Tran also agrees that the free fare has been an asset and suggests a vote or motion.
 - Ms. Anthes motions to make a statement of support. Gary Rosen seconds the motion. All vote in favor.

Opioid Update

Dr. Castiel Presents

- The data has shown a decrease in overdoses, but an increase in mortality. The state hasn't released numbers yet.
- Mortality rate for individuals coming into the city and using has increased.
- 2022 toxicology report 94% of people who has passed as a result of drug use had Fentanyl in their system. 54% had cocaine in their system, 25% had alcohol, 26% had Benzos, 11% had prescription opioids, 9% had amphetamines, 7% had actual heroin, and 5% had xylozine.
- Take home methadone has been helpful.
- 90% of people in jails are suffering with addiction. When they are released, they are not discharged to appropriate services and have one the highest overdose mortality.
- There is an opioid taskforce that looks for gaps.
 - Soloe Dennis says that our effort is ongoing with engaging our most vulnerable populations. It is ongoing work and we are up for the task.
 - Dr. Dyer says we're in a unique position the understanding of how everything is connected is broader than ever. We are able to have conversations we once weren't able to because of the increased understanding about what Public Health is.
 - Ms. Allen says that homelessness and addiction often goes hand in hand and that it would be great to have services set up at the shelters to provide the necessary treatment.
 - Ms. Anthes said that it seems that Fentanyl is an enormous problem. She asks if Narcan is effective against Fentanyl. Dr. Castiel says it is, but at a higher dose. Ms. Anthes says that safe consumption sites might save lives.
 - Mr. Rosen asks whose decision it will be for safe consumption sites. Dr. Castiel explains that the federal government doesn't allow it, but it would be a state by state decision. It is a process. Mr. Rosen suggests that we need more sufficient and affordable treatment centers.
 - Dr. Tran asks if Dr. Castiel has any updates regarding Brown University staff working towards opening safe consumption sites in Rhode Island. Dr. Castiel says

that she doesn't have any updates at this time. She mentions a program with SPOT Healthcare for the Homeless where participants can inject themselves outside of the facility then walk inside where they are monitored. Oxygen and narcan are provided, if needed. Dr. Tran asks if we're focusing on training people to use narcan if needed. Dr. Castiel informs that AIDS Project Worcester does go around and train people who use the drug as well as family members

WDPH Strategic Plan Update

Presented by Dr. Zach Dyer with Slides

- Since Worcester DPH is an accredited health department, we have to do a strategic plan every 3-5 years
- Three goals-
 - Develop
 - Promote staff wellness, raise wages, increase time off, grow epidemiology capacity, increase staff-wide training, create opportunities for cross-training and information sharing, reconfigure hiring and onboarding process.
 - Reduce
 - Build capacity across the division for engaging in racial justice work, increase opportunities for directly engaging with populations, identify a process for prioritizing health equity and racial justice across all programs, develop a plan to complete Community Health Assessment internally on an ongoing basis rather than through a hired contractor every 3 years,
 - Foster
 - Establish a communication and branding strategy to increase awareness of WDPH, increase community outreach, increase cross-department collaboration.
- Mr. Rosen says he'd like us to set a meeting with city council about this plan.
- Frances Anthes commends the plan. She says the goals are valuable and show that the division has really learned from COVID.
- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks what the Boards role will be in order to be an active participant with achieving the goals. Dr. Dyer says that the division can share updates on a twice a year basis. He would like to see more utilization of the Board of Health as a policy making board.

Vote on Vice Chair

- Ms. Anthes does believe we need a vice chairperson, but would like to table the topic until next month.
- Dr. Tran says that she will continue to be acting chairperson
- Dr. Hirsh says that we'll need clarification and have a fifth member appointed by City Manager

Vote on date for Public Hearing Regarding Retail and Smoking Bar Caps

Mr. Rosen makes a motion, Ms. Anthes seconds the motion. All vote to have the Public Hearing at the next meeting.

Agenda Items for Future Meetings

- A reference for social determinants of health across all reports
- Health disparities
- Infant mortality
- Mental Health, specifically with the youth

Mr. Rosen makes a motion to adjourn. Ms. Anthes seconds the motion.

Adjourn