



DATE: November 7, 2022
TO: Worcester Board of Health
FROM: Zach Dyer, MPH PhD, Acting Director
RE: WBOH Meeting/ WebEx Meeting Minutes October 3, 2022

Meeting called to order

Members Present: Jerry Gurwitz, MD, Gary Rosen, Khanh-Van Tran, MD, Frances Anthes, Chareese Allen

Staff Present: Zach Dyer, MPH PhD, Acting Director of Public Health, Michael Hirsh, MD, Medical Director, Matilde Castiel, MD, Health and Human Services Commissioner, Matthew Moore, Communications Specialist, Cherry Tangri, Tobacco Coordinator, Colleen DePina, Principal Clerk for Public Health **Guests Present:** Lou Brady, Family Health Center, Robert Zavoski, Family Health Center, Lisa Goodnight, MMA

Overdoses in the City Update

HHS Commissioner, Matilde Castiel, MD, presents with slides

- There has been a rise in Fentanyl-related overdoses as it is mixed in with cocaine and other drugs at the same time.
- Dr. Castiel presented on recent trends and statistics.
 - Frances Anthes asks what has changed since 2016- Fentanyl is a good part of what's going on as its easily manufactured. Asks if we can have a report on what it would take to do a pilot safe consumption site.
 - Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks is Narcan if readily available in the areas of high overdose- These are things being done in the community and with AIDS Project Worcester. A van called 'The Road To Care' to provide Narcan
 - Chareese Allen notices Queen and Lincoln St.- are higher areas of overdoses. Is there readily accessible Narcan in the businesses and residences in those areas and are they trained to use it? Dr. Castiel states that in shelters have Narcan and are trained, outreach workers out in the community
 - Gary Rosen asks if we distinguish between an overdose and use of a drug that contains fentanyl; suggests that when Fentanyl is laced in with another drug, it's not necessarily an overdose. Dr. Castiel states that fentanyl has been found in about every drug today. She explains that when someone leaves a rehab or is released from being incarcerated and they choose to use, they often use the same amount they used prior to being in recovery. Their tolerance is much lower, however, which often leads to overdose. Mr. Rosen says that he believes that if the drug user knew there was fentanyl in the drug they want to use, maybe they wouldn't use it. Dr. Castiel discusses the power of addiction and that people

struggling with it are looking for their next fix to feel better and aren't necessarily going to worry about what could be in the drug they are about to use. Mr. Rosen brings up 'Pot Shops' and wonders if having these shops is sending the wrong message to kids. Asks if there is a problem with this with young people/teens with opioids. Dr. Castiel informs that the average age that children starting to use (ie: alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, etc.) is 13, but there is no specific data of overdose with youth that she has from the city or state.

- Dr. Hirsh comments how much has been done in this area by the city. He mentions Safe Injection Sites in other countries and the success of reducing substance use and overdose. Suggests having a Safe Injection Site as a test site, doesn't feel like the way things are handled now will make a difference. He says that we're told constantly by the WPD that when the word gets out that a heroin shipment that has a lot of fentanyl in it, it attracts people from all over the state to come to Worcester, and from that we see an increase in overdoses over the next few weeks because people are looking for that 'buzz' or relief.
- Dr. Jerry Gurwitz says that throughout his time on the WBOH, he has seen the same patterns when it comes to overdoses and asks Dr. Castiel what some items are that she would have on a wish list. She answers, 1. Safe consumption sites 2. More clinicians to work with people in the emergency room 3. Wrap-around services for people with substance abuse at home 4. Stop incarcerating people for addiction and place them into treatment

Family Health Center of Worcester Staffing Concerns

Family Health Center CEO, Lou Brady, presents the discussion regarding staffing issues

- Media reports state that the health center had a reduction in force on September 1, 2022.
- A layoff of 35 individuals and a furlough of 15 individuals.
- Took this action because of going thru a long haul with COVID and ransomware attack and the snowball effects of both on staffing levels. This made it difficult to achieve volume targets that were budgeted. The cost to recover from the ransomware attack depleted cash reserves and left the health center in a vulnerable position. Working thru a structural deficit for a period of time. They had the expectations that there would be an upturn in revenue, partly due to a historic rate increase provided to them by the state in January
- Depleted cash reserves
- Interpreters were the furloughed team and were able to be brought back after only 2 weeks thanks to financial help from the city
- Starting the process on regrouping and rebuilding

- Frances Anthes states that community health center finances are fragile and dependent on the needs of the vulnerable populations served.
- Dr. Jerry Gurwitz asks Ms. Anthes what would happen if the Family Health Center went away- she says it serves over 30,000 patients who would then
- have no place else to go for primary care and then would go to the ERs which are not equipped to provide primary care services, they would go across the city to the Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center and overwhelm that system. Those 30,000 patients would likely only be seen for life threatening issues and primary preventative care would fall to the wayside. Family Health Center has always had a teaching mission, where medical students do their residency at

the community health centers to continue to educate people on how to work with vulnerable and homeless populations, immigrant and refugees, patients with substance abuse issues, work across language barriers, etc. Mr. Brady adds that 95% of the patients are low income, 3/4 are people of color, and close to 10% are homeless. \$88 million economic impact.

Chief Medical Officer of FHCW, Robert Zavoski, speaks

- The health center is a special place. This is the 4th health center he's worked. FHCW wants to be a part of the solution. He would like the health center to help with the transition from the prison system back out to the public
- Gary Rosen mentions the process used for City funding that helped reduce the furlough of interpreters was a decision made by the mayor and city manager. Asks if this is the process we want to continue using for funding agencies.
- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks what else the BOH can do and support Family Health Center. Mr. Brady said they sought to hold onto every service that they could. Had to close Southbridge operation, which didn't have the infrastructure to meet the patient demand and be sustainable for the long haul. This pause lets them regroup and he expects services to return. 1st step is to finish assessment with technical team. Building the recovery plan.

COVID-19 Update

Dr. Hirsh presents

- State of plateau. Admissions into the hospital are creeping up
- 60 cases across the UMass system, about 50 within Worcester. About 12 patients at St. Vincent's Hospital.
- Wastewater numbers are plateauing at a higher rate than we'd like
- Community spread rate is a little over 7%. Unreported home testing makes calculating rates difficult.
- About 35% of the community have received boosters. This does not include the Bivalent booster.
- New variant is BA 2.75.2
- No big outbreaks in the colleges

Monkeypox Update

Dr. Hirsh presents

- APW administered 400 vaccinations in September
- 15 documented cases in Worcester
- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks about the availability of the vaccines and if production is still an issue. Is it possible to make the vaccine available at colleges? Dr. Hirsh states that there are serious production issues with the Monkeypox vaccine which does affect making it available in other places. Zach adds that the issue of no appointments at APW has been resolved.

- Frances Anthes asks about peoples' fear of getting the next booster at the same time as the flu or other vaccines. Dr. Hirsh says there's nothing to say you can't get both the Monkeypox vaccine and the booster at the same time. Many people have been skipping the 1st or 2nd booster and then coming in to get the Bivalent.
- Gary Rosen talks about getting the flu vaccine and the covid vaccine at the same time. Asks about the Stop the Spread testing site by CVS downtown. Dr. Hirsh reports that people at the Senior Center are still fearful about getting the vaccine and boosters.

Urban Chicken Keeping

Zach Dyer presents (letter from the Worcester Food Policy Council)

- Seeing if there are any outright objections.
- The topic has come up several times at Worcester City Council.
- Planning board was in favor of a chicken ordinance passing.
- 71 municipalities in the Commonwealth allow or do not forbid chickening.
- Informs of regulations and ordinances in other municipalities
- Permitting will help keep track of chickens and ensure proper keeping, as many residences already keep chickens in the city.
 - Dr. Jerry Gurwitz asks if the ordinances will be issued by the board of Health. Mr. Dyer informs that at this time it is being petitioned to City Council, either the city council or BOH will have the power to implement /allow chickens.
 - Frances Anthes asks if the BOH will be responsible for checking if people are abiding by the ordinances. Mr. Dyer informs that most similar ordinances go through Inspectional Services
 - Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks how many people currently have chickens and how impactful this will be. Mr. Dyer does not have a prediction on how many people currently have chickens or how many will obtain chickens should the ordinance pass. For the most part, the burden would be responding to complaints.
 - Gary Rosen thinks it's a terrible idea. Believes they will lower home values, attract predators. He says Worcester is a classy city now and that chickens will not help.

Recommended Tobacco Policies

Cherry Tangri presents

- Proposed tobacco regulations, updating data, option to ban rolling papers, altogether or only flavored rolling papers and wraps.
- Ordinances propose to update the data, definitions including blunt wrap, adult only retail stores, updating the minimum age from 18-21,
- Add a cap to the tobacco retail permits. Currently 227 retailers
- Limiting the number of smoking bars. Currently 11 and 3 more working on opening.
- Limiting new permits within 500 feet of a school
- No NEW permits within 500 feet of an existing tobacco retailer
- If a tobacco retail store wants to also sell the products as an Adult only retail store, they need to have a separate location, not just a separate section in the existing store

- Increasing the minimum cigar prices to reflect Boston's increase
- Adding a tolling period
- Is the board in favor of merging all policies, local and state to only have state fines?
- Updating the environmental tobacco regulations overall
- Is the board interested in merging the ordinances and the local BOH regulations? It would be easier for the retailers to understand and would be one stop for all the regulations.

Next Meeting Date and Topics- November 14, 2022- Climate Change, Public Transportation and the WRTA, Reproductive Rights, Flu Season

Frances Anthes moves to adjourn, Dr. Khanh-Van Tran seconds

Adjourn 8:30pm