



DATE: November 23, 2022
TO: Worcester Board of Health
FROM: Zachary Dyer MPH PhD, Acting Director
RE: **WBOH Meeting/ WebEx Meeting Minutes November 14, 2022**

Meeting called to order at 6:32 PM

Welcome and Introductions

Members Present: Jerry Gurwitz, MD, Chairperson, Gary Rosen, Frances Anthes, Chareese Allen; **Absent** Khanh-Van Tran, MD, Vice Chairperson

Staff Present: Dr. Mike Hirsh, Medical Director, Zach Dyer, Acting Director for the Division of Public Health, Matilde Castiel, Commissioner for Health and Human Services, Matt Moore, Communications Specialist, Nikki Nixon, Chief of Data, Research, and Epidemiology, Colleen DePina, Administrative Assistant

Approval of the Minutes from August 15, 2022

Frances Anthes moves to approve. Chareese Allen seconds. Minutes approved.

Approval of the Minutes from October 3, 2022

Frances Anthes moves to approve. Chareese Allen seconds. Minutes approved.

Review and Discussion of Gun Violence with Mike Weisser

Tabled until December 5, 2022

Review and Discussion of COVID-19 Updates

Dr. Hirsh presents

- 2 new variants BQ 1 and BQ 1.1.
- Wastewater numbers have been down as of the beginning of the month.
- There is an increase in Flu and RSV.
- The average dwell time in the Emergency Department is about 65 hours. 20% of people who go to the ED leave without being seen because the wait is too long.
- There are currently no visiting nurse services and rehab centers have reduced the number of patients they can take because they don't have enough staffing.
- The mask advisory has remained in effect since May and it has been reemphasized, but we may have to revive a mandate.
- Hospitals stopped elective surgery again due to overall crowding of hospitals.
- UMass Beaumont Center is allowed to refurbish into an acute care facility of med surg beds, which adds 91 beds to the UMass system. Memorial is reopening 2 units which adds 23 beds.
- Pediatrics still only has 52 beds at UMass and 42 at Memorial. Worcester has had to send to children as far as Bangor, ME because there are not enough pediatric beds here.

- Only about 10% of eligible people have taken the Bivalent booster.
- An order from the state would be needed to commandeer the DCU Center for more beds. Wants to have a conversation with the City Manager to discuss options.
 - Chareese Allen works in the ER and says that there are lots of staffing issues. It's great to get extra beds, but they may not have the staff to take care of them. She says that many people go into the ER for one thing and find out that they also have Covid; maybe reinstating the mask mandate is needed because people are not taking it seriously anymore.
 - Gary Rosen asks if any cities in the US have returned to having a mask mandate. Dr. Hirsh informs 'Not yet'. Gary doesn't think we'd be able to enforce a mask mandate currently because people seem to be just tired of fighting it. He says we need to do what we can to get people to wear masks. He asks if the testing site is still open on Front St. Dr. Hirsh confirms that the Stop the Spread clinic in the Mercantile building is still open and authorized to remain open at least until the end of December.
 - Zach Dyer adds that there are some school systems reinstating mask mandates surrounding the holidays.
 - Dr. Matilde Castiel informs that UMass tests on Mondays and Thursday. On Monday, 10.31.22, 40 tests were done and on Thursday, 11.3.22, 40 tests were done with a total of 10 positive cases for the week. On Monday, 11.7 30 tests were done and on Thursday 11.10 41 tests were done with a total of 15 positive cases.
 - Frances Anthes asks who is the most vulnerable right now. Dr. Hirsh said it is a complicated answer. For Covid, the risk groups are the same- people over 60 years old, obese, diabetic, those with cardiopulmonary problems, and immunocompromised problems. RSV is almost exclusively children, about 94%. Frances asks what the treatment is. Dr. Hirsh informed that it is very much supportive care, chest physical therapy. Symptoms include fever, rapid respiratory rate, potentially cyanosis. Frances would like to have a further conversation with the schools.
 - Dr. Jerry Gurwitz believes that the public is unaware of the severity. Unless there was a concerted effort by healthcare leaders (ie: Dean and Chancellors of medical schools), public officials (ie: city manager and mayor), in addition to the BOH and the state, he does not think much will happen. He does say that this should not prevent them from issuing a statement, though he believes that the impact will be limited. Dr. Hirsh says that the Board carries a lot of credibility. If the Board is willing to make a statement, he thinks it would at least make people think. Dr. Gurwitz proposes that something be drafted for the Board to review and vote on for December meeting.
 - Chareese agrees but believes it will be a hard sell.
 - Frances asks if there can be something done on the school end of things and if we should be discussing with the Superintendent and other staff.
 - Gary agrees with issuing a statement as soon as possible.

Housing and Homelessness Update

Matilde Castiel presents

- The number of homeless individuals doubles to predict the winter numbers. Summer of 2022 was in the 420s, the winter is anticipated to be well into the 800s. Worcester has a total capacity of 149 beds; Queen St. shelter 96/100 beds, MLK Building (part of SMOC) 34/34 beds, Harbor (Living in Freedom Together) 15/15 beds. They are looking into opening a 60-bed shelter and are working on finding a site to accommodate the higher numbers in the winter.
 - Frances Anthes asks about Grace House with Network of Compassion. Dr. Castiel informs that the location they are trying to open isn't anticipated to be open until the Spring. Funding starts December first for the 60-bed shelter, they just need to find a site.

- Gary Rosen asks what they are looking for in a site; does it need to be ready to move into or can it be a facility that needs work. Dr. Castiel says that they already have cots, bedding, and other equipment. It will require a bathroom, a small kitchen with a refrigerator to store food, and the space to separate people as needed. Gary suggests a site.
- Dr. Jerry Gurwitz asks if the numbers shared include families with children. Dr. Castiel informs that families in the state of MA have the right to shelter, so families are in hotels if there isn't space in family shelters. This is the responsibility of the Central Mass Housing Alliance (CMHA).

Recommended Changes to Tobacco Policies

Zach Dyer presents Top 5 Tobacco items (*document presented*)

- **Tobacco remains the #1 behavioral cause of death in the US**
 1. Updating data, definitions, and codifying previously passed regulations
 2. Smoking bar cap- currently 11 in the city, 1 to open in the near future. 25 smoking bars statewide. Implementing the cap would cap off the smoking bars at 12. The cap would decrease over time. We don't want to interrupt with businesses, but we do want to stop the growth of issuing these permits.
 3. Tobacco retail permit cap- Between 225-270 active tobacco permits in Worcester, disproportionately located in low-income neighborhood. Capping permits increases the authority to enforce existing regulations.
 4. Minimum prices- reflects Boston's pricing and to reflect increases in inflation along the consumer price index- the new minimum price are \$2.90 for a single cigar and \$5.80 for a multipack of cigars.
 - Chareese Allen motions to accept the recommendation to change the minimum pricing of cigars, Frances Anthes seconds the motion. **Yes-4, No-0. Approved**
 5. Unified fining structure- align Worcester's fining structure with the State Tobacco Control Law.
 - Chareese Allen motions to unify fining structure, Frances Anthes seconds the motion. **Yes-4, No-0. Approved**
- Dr. Jerry Gurwitz asks what Zach Dyer's goal is. Zach Dyer informs that he'd like to have a discussion and then hold a public hearing for the items that he believes the community should weigh in on. He recommends 2 and 3 for a hearing and that 1, 4 and 5 are not controversial and simply bring Worcester in alignment with other communities.
- Frances Anthes asks what kinds of organizations have the tobacco retail license. Zach Dyer, a large bulk is corner store, small markets. Frances agrees that a hearing for items 2 and 3 would be a good idea
- Gary Rosen says that he supports these measures.

Next Meeting Date and Topics

Next Meeting December 5, 2022

Review and Discussion of Gun Violence with Mike Weisser

Goodbye to Jerry Gurwitz as a member of the Worcester Board of Health

Gary Rosen makes a motion to adjourn, Chareese Allen seconds the motion.

Adjourn at 7:56PM