



**DATE:** December 23, 2022  
**TO:** Worcester Board of Health  
**FROM:** Soloe M. Dennis, MS, MEP, Director  
**RE:** **WBOH Meeting/ WebEx Meeting Minutes for December 5, 2022**

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***Meeting called to order at 6:30 PM***

***Welcome and Introductions***

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

**Staff Present:** Michael Hirsh, MD, Medical Director, Matilde Castiel, MD, Commissioner of HHS, Zachary Dyer, PhD, Deputy Commissioner of HHS, Soloe Dennis, MS, MEP, Director of the Division of Public Health, Matt Moore, Communications Specialist, Amelia Houghton, Chief of Public Health Nursing, Nikki Nixon, Chief of Data, Research, and Epidemiology **Guests:** Mike Weisser

***Approval of the Minutes from November 14, 2022***

Gary Rosen motions to approve, Chareese Allen seconds the motion. Minutes approved.

***Introduction of the new Director of Public Health, Soloe Dennis***

***Reintroduction of Zachary Dyer, MPH, PhD, Deputy Commissioner of HHS***

***Farewell to Dr. Jerry Gurwitz as Chair of the WBOH***

Dr. Gurwitz handed the running of this meeting over for Vice-Chairperson, Dr. Khanh-Van Tran

***Discussion of Gun Violence***

Presented by Mike Weisser

- Parents of slain Sandy Hook students won a \$37 million settlement against Remington, the company that manufactured the rifle used in the shooting, using a state law in CT that found them liable for selling an item too dangerous.
- There is an assault rifle ban in the state of Massachusetts.
- 1993 articles written definitively prove that access to a gun in the home creates a medical risk and it is a risk to community health.
- Public Health and public safety are compelling interests. Compelling interest means that a community decides that certain things are so important that they make sure they're done by way of public funds. This was first done in the colonial times with public school and the money came from property taxes.
- Worcester's annual gun buyback unique in that is run by a medical doctor.

- The point and value of a gun buyback is to give the community the opportunity to focus on the issue of gun risk
- Worcester has a relatively low rate of gun violence.
- Chareese Allen said she'd like to see updated studies. Mike Weisser says that about 90% of gun assaults occur within walking distance of the home of the victim, and at least half occur in the street.
- Gary Rosen asks if firearm storage is a problem. Mike Weisser claims that there is no research that shows that safe storage has any positive impact of gun violence. Gary says that many shooters seem to be using a gun that doesn't belong to them- it's often the parent's or a friend's firearm. Access to getting someone else's firearm seems too easy. 5-6 years ago, Mike Weisser says that he interviewed 61 inmates at the youth jail in Springfield. He asked them how easy it is to get a gun. Most of them answered that it's very easy. He also asked why they need a gun, and they answered that they need to protect themselves. Gary assumes that the US leads the world in gun violence, and Mike Weisser confirms that the US leads the advanced world in gun violence.
- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks about possibly implementing policies and education about doing checkups. Mike Weisser believes that every gun owner should be made to go into the police station to present their registered firearm yearly. He says that the US is the only country that puts firearms in the center of things when it comes to our culture.
- Dr. Michael Hirsh says he has worked with Mike Weisser since the Sandy Hook shooting. UMass is working to teach students to help patients make an evaluation of risk and would like to develop a numbered scoring system to calculate risk. A demented elderly person, depressed teen, angry spouse, or inquisitive toddler all increase the risk of having a gun in the home

### ***Discussion of Opioid Settlement Funds***

Zach Dyer presents

- After lawsuits against the manufacturers of prescription opioids, the state of Massachusetts was a part of those lawsuits. Cities and towns have had to spend money and resources to combat the opioid epidemic. Funds must be used in some way to address the impacts of the opioid epidemic and decades of pushing prescription opioids by the manufacturers.
- Worcester has already started to receive opioid settlement funds. Ways that the city plans to use the funds include the newly funded position of Maternal and Child Health Coordinator and with a contract with Community Health Link (CHL). Dr. Matilde Castiel adds that CHL was awarded \$1 million at the beginning of the year to implement a crisis intervention plan with 911 calls that would send a clinician or recovery coach to respond to calls regarding mental health or overdose. For FY23, the funds are around \$700,000, and we will receive funds for 18 years. The funds will go up slightly for the next few years and then slowing taper down. There will be more discussion in the coming years
  - Gary Rosen said that he doesn't have any questions at this point, but it is important to follow. He asks if the funds come directly from the federal government or if they come through the state. Zach Dyer informs that a good portion come through the state.
  - Chareese Allen asks about accountability measures and if there are any restrictions and if any funds can be allocated toward opioid overdose. Zach Dyer informs that the funds are restricted to use all funds directly on addressing opioid use and overdose and that the funds are currently allocated correctly. Dr. Castiel adds that the state opioid remediation fund will also be distributed to communities.

- Dr. Khanh-Van Tran asks what the board has with guidance in allocating the funds? Dr. Castiel informs that we have an opioid taskforce and that a great need is wraparound services.

### ***Set a date for Public Hearing for Tobacco Permit Caps***

Zach Dyer presents

Two proposed changes to tobacco regulations are Tobacco Retailer Cap on permits and Smoking Bar Cap on permits. All agree to hold the Public Hearing during the next BOH meeting to be held on January 9, 2023.

### ***Review and Discussion of COVID-19 updates***

Dr. Hirsh presents with shared slides

- The weekend immediately after Thanksgiving there was a rise in numbers, but they stabilized shortly after.
  - RSV may have peaked in Worcester. It is still quite high, but seems to have receded a bit.
  - Flu cases are going up and is now the leader of the ‘tri-demic’.
  - He predicts that COVID numbers will go up based on the wastewater data reported, which are usually a good indicator that case numbers will go up
  - New variants, BQ1 and BQ1.1 are in 70% of positive cases
  - This surge seems to be more transmissible but less impactful, but short be short lived. The surge in France and Italy lasted about a month.
  - Mask wearing should not be mandatory, but the advisory stands
  - The next best step is to increase Flu vaccinations which are currently at 33%
  - Worcester Covid vaccination have been stuck at about 65%, Boosters at 50%, and the Bivalent Booster is between 8-10%.
  - Native immunity not good enough for omicron sub-variants. Some vaccination in the body will do a better job than none at all.
  - If there is a huge rise in Covid or Flu cases, it could overwhelm the system. If RSV recedes enough it may balance out.
- Gary Rosen asked if RSV still affects children more. Dr. Hirsh confirms that 45% of cases have been in ages 9 and below, and 10-15% of cases are in ages 70 and above. Gary Rosen asks if we having testing for the ‘tri-demic’ viruses. Dr. Hirsh confirms that there are testing for RSV, Flu, and Covid. Gary Rosen asks if we are doing much better because we don’t have the deaths. 300-400 people die every day from Covid in us 9-15.000 a day. Vaccines have been very important, as well as treatment with the oral medications, monoclonal antibodies, and native and vaccination immunities. The elderly haven’t kept up with vaccinations and they make up about 75% of the deaths.
  - Chareese Allen says that working in the ER over the weekend they were seeing a lot of incidental findings. Patients go in for something else and they find out they have Covid, but symptoms seem to be a lot milder. Where do you see this epidemic going? Where do you see this peaking? Dr. Hirsh predicts that it will peak and then taper off the week before Christmas. He’s uncertain beyond that point. The hope is that Covid will get into a rhythm, similar to that of the Flu, where we’d only need to get the booster once a year because the variants are mutating as much and we can predict what variant it will be for the upcoming season. Chareese Allen predicts another spike after the Christmas holidays. Dr Hirsh said that he and Dr. Castiel talked to the people who run the Stop The Spread program at the Mercantile Center for UMass and they are going to stop their testing and

vaccination program at the end of January, which they all saw as reasonable.

- Dr. Tran says that a lot of the patients with flu are older adults and asks if they can offer both Flu and Covid at vaccination sites. Dr. Hirsh says that this has been their policy at their clinics. Most commercial pharmacies also offer multiple vaccines, including flu and Covid. Dr. Tran asks Dr. Castiel if there can be a Flu incentive similarly to the current Covid incentive. Zach Dyer adds that it depends on funding sources and that most vaccine funding is for Covid. However, we're doing a lot with getting the messaging out about the flu vaccine

***Agenda items for 2023 meetings***

Chareese would like further discuss the opioid crisis in the city.

Gary would like to discuss zero fare bussing and have a presentation early on in 2023. He said it has been approved to extend thru June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023. He'd also like to discuss health of our young people

Dr. Tran would like to discuss homelessness in the city of Worcester as well as food disparities and access to healthy food.

***Next Meeting Date***

January 9, 2023

***Adjourn***

Gary Rosen motions to adjourn. Chareese Allen seconds the motions.

***Meeting Adjourned at 8:20PM***