

Worcester Board of Health Meeting
Meeting Minutes
Meeting Held at 25 Meade St. Room 109
Monday, November 18, 2024
6:30 pm
Minutes Prepared by Brenda Wright

Welcome and Introductions

Board Members Present: Chair, Frances Anthes, Vice Chair, Chareese Allen, Gary Rosen, Leopoldo Negrón Cruz, and Michael Perotto.

Staff Present: Dr. Michael Hirsh Medical Director of Public Health; Soloe Dennis Director of Worcester Division Public Health and the Central Massachusetts Health Alliance, Dr Matilde Castile, Commissioner Health and Human Services, Kyle O'Connor, Tobacco Specialist Worcester Division of Public Health and Central Massachusetts Public Health Alliance.

Guests: Gordon Benson, CEO Community Health Link, James Leary Vice President, Community & Government Relations, Dave Swania City Director of Communication for Community Health Link, Stephanie Manzi, Vice President for Substance Use Disorder Services for Community Health Link.

Review and approve October 21st, 2024, Meeting Minutes

Michael Perotto made a motion to approve the amended minutes from October 21, 2024. Gary Rosen seconded the motion. All members voted in favor of approving the amended minutes.

An adjustment was made to the agenda where the Tobacco Hearing was taken as the first item on the agenda.

Tobacco Hearing

The hearing was brought against 80 West Street who had violated the conditions of their license by selling a flavored product within 24 hours of inspection, along with evidence of cigar pricing discrepancies. The owner Adel Alomari was out of country but was represented by his brother Adnan Alomari and friend Princess Morales. Kyle O'Connor, Tobacco Prevention Specialist brought the charges on behalf of the Worcester Division of Public Health.



Kyle O'Connor began by outlining previous violations of 80 West Street within the past 36 months. Starting on April 26, 2022, the store received warning letters from the Department of Revenue (DOR) for selling untaxed tobacco products. While this was not an inspection done by the City of Worcester, it showed a history of noncompliance. On January 17, 2023, they received a \$300 fine for selling without a valid tobacco permit (late renewal). On May 22, 2024, they received \$1,000 fine for selling flavored vapes. The most recent violation occurred on October 23, 2024, where the store sold a flavored vape to an undercover WPD staff and received a \$300 fine for inaccurate cigar pricing. They admitted to violating the terms of their license.

A recommendation was made to the board by the department, that a \$2000 citation as per regulation be paid, in addition to a 5-7 business days suspension of license for 80 West Street. The board accepted the recommendations from the tobacco department. The chair impressed upon the owner that there have been multiple violations in the past and according to the Law, the Board has the authority to not only impose more severe fines, but to permanently suspend their license. A decision was reached to charge a fine of \$2000 in addition to a 7 consecutive business days suspension of their license.

A motion was made that 80 West Street pay a fine of \$2000 for violation of DOR license. The motion was made by Michael Perotto and seconded by Chareese Allen. All in favor.

A second motion was made that the tobacco license for 80 West Street be suspended for seven (7) consecutive business days. The motion was made by Michael Perotto and seconded by Chareese Allen. All in favor.

The department will get in touch with the owner to work on the specifics of the violation. Soloe Dennis said that they are willing to provide education especially to new tobacco establishments, but as a part of their follow-up they still must ensure that tobacco establishments across the city, are being compliant with the rules and regulations established.

Communicable Disease Update

Dr. Hirsh provided an update on communicable diseases in Worcester and Worcester County, this included COVID-19 and other local communicable diseases. Regarding COVID Dr Hirsch said that after three (3) consecutive weeks of decline in numbers the last two reports received on Friday the 15th and Monday the 18th of November showed an increase. He said that we were still at a lower level than when we had our late-summer early-fall surge, but was unsure of the direction this will take as there are still several covid cases around. He said one of the things working against us is that several persons are treating Covid19 like the common cold. He continues to recommend that at risk persons get their vaccines updated and reminded us that both the flu and covid vaccines can be taken at the same time. Dr Hirsh said the reports from UMass and St Vincent hospitals show very little admissions for Covid and lower employee callout.



Overall, he thinks we are still in a good position but will see what happens after the family holidays, as these usually involve indoor activities.

There were concerns regarding persons who are over 60 years and have heart diseases, obesity, pulmonary diseases, auto immune diseases and preexisting lung diseases. Dr Hirsh said these comorbidities make Covid more dangerous for this age group. He advised persons travelling in December to wear masks especially going through airports.

Mosquito Borne Diseases

Dr Hirsh reported that testing for mosquitoes have been suspended, and he will not be reporting on Triple E and West Nile diseases as he thinks they won't be coming back until the spring. He said if the winter is as mild as is being projected, he thinks we may have a bad season but will wait to see what happens.

M Pox

This seems to have subsided both in Africa and the United States. It was not seen as a threat.

Avian Flu & H5N1

This is still a cause of concern as there is report of odd animals having picked up this flu from cows. Additional concerns are the possibility that this could spread to the human population, so cases are being monitored carefully.

Mycoplasma Pneumonia/ 'Walking Pneumonia'

DR Hirsh said it came to his attention that an alarming number of children were contracting what is being referred to as 'walking pneumonia'. The symptoms are coughing with a low-grade fever, but kids are not sick enough to be admitted to hospital. Chest x-rays are done but these do not show the standard kind of changes one would see from a strep pneumonia or a strap pneumonia. Walking pneumonia is mostly caused by mycoplasma which is best treated with Zithromax. There is a reported 12 to 15 cases each week. Dr Hirsch said that he reported this to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, who have since sent out an alert that there is an outbreak. He said the department does not foresee much hospitalization from this but wants the public to be aware that if their children have a protracted cold, it could be more than just a common cold.

Pertussis/Whooping Cough

Pertussis symptoms present as a persistent cough, loss of appetite and vomiting. In the past this would persist for weeks and even caused death. The Tdap vaccine with antibiotic properties was



developed to treat that. Dr Hirsh said currently there's a rise of this disease again as people are not getting vaccinated. According to Federal regulation vaccination is a choice, and Dr Hirsh

feels the outlook for that could prove very detrimental especially for children. He foresees children getting sick and hospitalized from what is a very preventable illness. He expressed gratitude to the City Manager, the Mayor and City Council who continue to be supportive of

Director Soloe Dennis and the department, so that they can continue to do the right thing for our children. The chair asked if those in the over 60 age group who are at risk should be wearing masks. Dr Hirsh said that he did not think it necessary yet, but for those who are travelling especially through the airport system, may want to do so.

Shingles

Persons over 60 are encouraged to get vaccinated. Also, not a lot of RSVs was reported as this usually occurs in December and affects mostly children. On a good note, he said the elderly who had pneumonia and didn't respond to antibiotics are responding to RSV. RSV is a onetime only vaccine.

There was a question-and-answer session that followed which included the following.

1. What percentage of the population is vaccinated against Covid19.

ANS: The last report from spring last year shows 88%

2. Is there any legislation in place that gives us the authority to require schools, local and state, to be vaccinated?

ANS: The federal government says vaccination must be optional.

3. When will we know whether the virus that covers the present flu shot is the virus that causes flu in the winter?

ANS: According to the country's top biologists working with NIH, the flu shot is around 60% effective.

Update on Substance Use Disorder Continuum Services at CHL

The chair welcomed the presenters from CHL and thanked them for coming to update the meeting. She said she was interested in knowing the city's ability to provide substance disorder services for the homeless especially this time of year. Dave Swania City Director of Communication for Community Health and Stephanie Manzi, Vice President for Substance Use Disorder Services for Community Health Link, gave the update.



Stephanie Manzie said that CHL has resumed three (3) services that were temporarily closed. These are,

1. Transitional Support Services.

The facility for this service has been renovated with increased safety and is at full capacity with 30 available beds. They provide inpatient substance abuse treatment and transitional support. The main goal of the program is to prepare clients to transition into the community and connect them with appropriate community resources so they will be in the best position to remain sober.

2. Clinical Support Services. This is also known as the stabilization unit and is opened at half capacity with 16 beds.

3. Acute Treatment Services which is their detox services. This is slated to open in January with a capacity of 24 beds. In the meanwhile, persons requiring detox services are asked to contact the CHL and they will be connected to other detox services within as well as outside the city. She said that persons who have reached out to them have been able to get the necessary treatment they need as they have partners they work along with to ensure that this happens.

The presenter said while they are still not able to fill all the needs, generally people who need services are being taken care of. The wait list for these persons is considerably reduced, when compared to other towns. This is because of the different levels of care offered by CHL.

The question was raised regarding staffing which has been an issue in the past, the response was there has been an increase in CHL's talent acquisition numbers each month, so there was improvement in that area. She also said that a recall was done for each of the programs and many staff returned. She said staffing was done throughout the reopening process and those who stayed were actively engaged in the process.

Dr Castiel reported that another shelter would be opened on November 19 for the homeless population. Throughout the winter, approximately 600 persons are predicted to utilize the shelters across the city. She said persons sometimes stay up to 1 month in shelters, but for the most part they stay on average 1-3 days. She emphasized that addiction services are needed because in the past, persons were sent out of the area to recovery coaches and outreach workers as there was nowhere to put them. She is thankful that CHL is on board and hopes that a collaboration with them will help to address and alleviate some of these issues. Dr Castiel gave a report on overdose deaths for 2023 and 2024

- January to October 2023, 857
- January to October 2024, 561, a reduction of 34.5%

Zeroing on January to June 2023, 59 overdose and the same period for 2024, 13. A reduction of 78%. Some programs that are in place that have contributed to this reduction include,



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- Outreach workers in communities with Narcan available for distribution.
- “Road to Care” program providing medication and treatment in the communities.

- Spectrum Mobile van provides medication including methadone.
- When the ambulances are in the communities, Suboxone, along with a combination of treatments are given to those who do not want to go to hospital.

These measures have aided in the reduction of overdose mortality.

The Chair thanked Dr Castiel for the update and the work she continues to do.

Open Floor

The chair asked that first Mondays of the month meetings resume as this was interrupted because of the holidays falling on those Mondays. The next board meeting will be on December 2, 2024. Some members of the board will join remotely as they will be travelling.

The chair suggested that a presentation on Pertussis/whooping cough could be done at the next meeting. Dr Hirsh asked that it be moved to January allowing time to prepare. He gave an update on guns and said that he had spoken with the superintendent of the school system where there is a program in place to educate the students. It’s called McGruff Crime Dog it basically outlines what the student should do if they find a gun.

1. Don’t touch it
2. Run away
3. Tell everyone

The goal is for this to be incorporated in the health curriculum in town as well as being streamed virtually to bring awareness.

Next Meeting Dates and Topics

December 2nd, 2024, at 6:30pm

Future Topics

Pertussis Whooping Cough/Other immunizations

Adjournment

Gary Rosen moved to adjourn the meeting. Leopold Cruz seconded the motion. All members voted in favor. The meeting adjourned at 7:41 PM.