



CMRPHA Newsletter

Volume 2 | Issue 1 | April/May 2023

WDPH to facilitate updated CHAs

The Greater Worcester Regional Community Health Assessment (CHA) will soon have a new look and feel, and it will now be facilitated by the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) in conjunction with offices across the Worcester Department of Health & Human Services.

The CHA aims to identify community health issues, barriers to care, disparities in health outcomes, vulnerable populations, and gaps in the health service system across the Central Massachusetts Regional Public Health Alliance. Previously, it was produced every three years by UMass Memorial Health as the lead agency in partnership with Fallon Health, Hanover Insurance, the Coalition for a Healthy Greater Worcester, and WDPH. Each organization will still be involved, but WDPH will now take a more hands-on role in data collection and community engagement through the newly formed Office of Data, Research, and Epidemiology (ODRE).

The decision for WDPH to assume facilitation of the CHA was borne out of its capacity and goal to produce a tool that can be maintained continuously rather than every three years and to have a more up-to-date and in-depth understanding of the community's health needs.

"The data we collect in the CHA informs so much of WDPH's work and vision. Managing it internally allows us to control its scope—to be as broad or focused as need. It also positions WDPH as the source of the most up-to-date information, enabling

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The WDPH Behavioral Health team presents to a class at South High School in Worcester about mental health and substance use

Community Health team expands post-Youth Health Survey outreach to schools

The Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) Community Health team is ramping up outreach in school districts in Worcester, Shrewsbury, and Grafton to address challenges related to mental health, delaying first use of substances (specifically alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis), and other issues identified in the 2021 Regional Youth Health Survey.

"Mental health is a priority in all our Alliance towns. Following the pandemic, our youth—like many people—are struggling with their

mental health, and this was reflected in the most recent Regional Youth Health Survey data. As a department, we know we cannot work on delaying use of substances without addressing mental health, so we are meeting our communities where they are at, which is finding creative ways to respond to mental health challenges," said WDPH Behavioral Health Manager Jennifer Nakijoba.

In a major upcoming endeavor, the Behavioral Health team within Com-

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The Central Massachusetts Regional Public Health Alliance (CMRPHA) Newsletter is published by the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) to present stories about how the Alliance is working to improve, promote, and protect the health and safety of its residents through community and academic partnerships, data-driven decision-making, and high quality public health services.

WDPH is the lead agency of the CMRPHA, a coalition of four municipalities (Grafton, Shrewsbury, West Boylston, and Worcester) working cooperatively to create and sustain a viable, efficient regional public health district.

If you are interested in learning more, please feel free to contact WDPH at 508-799-8531 or health@worcesterma.gov.

Soloe Dennis named Director of WDPH, CMRPHA

Former Springfield Deputy HHS Commissioner prioritizes regional health inequities

In December 2022, Soloe Dennis, was hired as the Director of the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH), succeeding Acting Director Zach Dyer, Ph.D. Overseeing the daily operations of WDPH and the Central Massachusetts Regional Public Health Alliance (CMRPHA), Dennis hit the ground running, visiting local vaccine clinics, meeting with municipal leadership, and spearheading work to address public health challenges and health inequities.

“My transition to this role has been wonderful. I am lucky to be working with great administrators in the Alliance communities. The staff that I have been communicating and collaborating with are very knowledgeable and passionate about their individual roles and positions,” he said.

Dennis praised WDPH’s innovative approach to developing public health systems and programs, and he was particularly attracted to the position by the CMRPHA’s history of implementing public health initiatives from a regional perspective. As Director, he now aims to advance the Alliance’s work and looks forward to collaborating to improve health outcomes of the region’s residents.

“I could not be more excited to welcome Soloe to the team. He brings exceptional leadership qualities, an incredible wealth of experience, and a commitment to addressing public health inequities. Even more, he knows and loves the City of Worcester as a former resident, and I look forward to collaborating with him to improve and protect the health of all our residents,” said Worcester City Manager Eric D. Batista.

Soon after joining WDPH and the CMRPHA, Dennis was elected Board Chair of the Massachusetts Health Council, a 102-year-old organization dedicated to health advocacy,



Soloe Dennis succeeds Acting Director Zach Dyer, Ph.D. to oversee the daily operations of WDPH and the CMRPHA

education, and programs addressing health inequities and social determinants of health. The Council leads a broad group of stakeholders to foster a strong culture of health in Massachusetts and enable communities to thrive.

Previously, Dennis served as Deputy Commissioner for the Department of Health & Human Services in the City of Springfield since 2016. In that role, he advised the Commissioner on policy and regulatory issues, program priorities, strategic alignment of activities, and resource allocation. He also oversaw several offices and initiatives covering substance abuse and prevention, tobacco, nursing, environmental health, problem gambling, marijuana compliance, health equity, racial justice, and public health preparedness and response.

“I am confident that Soloe is the right person to lead the Division of Public Health as Worcester faces challenges such as health disparities, COVID-19, homelessness, and sub-

stance misuse. He has accomplished amazing work throughout the state, and I am eager to work closely with him and the entire Division to advance our city’s health and well-being and build on the achievements of previous directors,” said Castiel.

Before joining the City of Springfield, Dennis worked for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) as the Director of Local Public Health Initiatives and as Regional Director for the Western Massachusetts region. As Director of Local Public Health Initiatives, he led workforce development initiatives to ensure that all of the Commonwealth’s 351 local boards of health had the appropriate skill set and training needed to carry out the 10 essential services of core public health functions. Dennis was instrumental in strengthening engagement and partnership with the state’s academic institutions around research and workforce development efforts. As Regional Director, he oversaw the Northampton Regional Health Office, supporting MDPH priority areas and staff communications across all bureaus.

In addition to the Massachusetts Health Council, Dennis serves on the boards of numerous organizations, including the University of Massachusetts School of Public Health and Health Sciences Dean Advisory Board, MDPH Local and Regional Public Health Advisory Committee, and Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts.

Dennis earned his Master of Science in Environmental Health from the University of Massachusetts School of Public Health and Health Sciences, and he is a graduate of the Commonwealth Senior Leadership Program and is a Master Exercise Practitioner certified by the Department of Homeland Security.

CMRPHA to benefit from annual health assessments

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it to build trust with residents and partners. We can be more nimble and better able to respond to community needs,” said Deputy Commissioner of Health & Human Services and former Acting Director of Public Health Zach Dyer, Ph.D.

WDPH plans to continue producing a printed CHA report, but it will also now be supplemented with an interactive online tool. Live data dashboards will be updated on a regular basis to keep residents and community partners updated on the most pressing health issues and priorities.

“The increased availability of data is exciting, and I foresee the dashboard helping many local organizations and residents. It allows us to provide more data on health topics that would be limited by a print-only version and expand the public’s access to critical health data. Consistent monitoring of these data will inform our work and allow us to be timely,” said Chief of Data, Research, and Epidemiology Nikki Nixon.

In addition to influencing actionable solutions that will be developed in the next Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), the CHA’s ongoing updates will be readily accessible for public uses including academic coursework and grant proposal composition.

WDPH assembled an advisory committee made up of about 50 community partners that began meeting in March. The committee is tasked with developing the scope of the CHA based on the most useful information and data to shape community health programming and planning. It will help determine public survey questions and which health outcomes and indicators to include.

The new CHA is expected to be available to the public by October 2023 and will include data around the health impact of COVID-19 and the

perspectives of residents disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The dashboards will be fed in part by existing public data sources such as the U.S. Census and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention databases, which allows it to update in real-time when those sources are refreshed.

Facilitation of the CHA has been enshrined in the upcoming WDPH/CMRPHA strategic plan as part of an overall goal to reduce health inequities and promote racial justice. One avenue to accomplish that goal is establishing a CHA and CHIP process

for each of the Alliance towns, with a focus on elevating voices and stories of neglected populations by directly engaging with populations with lived experience.

“By making this change now and managing the CHA through the ODRE, WDPH is ahead of the curve by organizing its own epidemiological structure to better understand and communicate community needs. This emphasis on epidemiology to inform local public health will soon be required based on upcoming state mandate, and we will be well positioned to fulfill that,” said Dyer.



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WDPH launches new Maternal & Child Health office

Seeking to address a public health need voiced by the community, the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) officially launched a new Maternal & Child Health office under the Community Health team in January 2023, led by Emile Somda, M.D. One of the major goals of the team is to create a centralized data source related to maternal and child health that can be used by municipalities and community partners to identify and address critical issues.

Although elements of maternal and child health work previously existed within WDPH, including the Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) breastfeeding and Community Health tobacco and substance use prevention programs, the new team is designed to align the Division's expertise and resources and bring them to bear on maternal and child health challenges.

"This new team is an opportunity to rethink how community health work is organized; it will allow our expertise and work in areas of community need to drive our grants, rather than grants driving our work. It also brings us more in line with core public health areas at the state and national levels," said Deputy Commissioner of Health & Human Services and former Acting Director of Public Health Zach Dyer, Ph.D.

In addition to building on the work being done within WDPH, the Maternal & Child Health team will incorporate data being collected by community partners, such as the Worcester Healthy Baby Collaborative (WHBC) and Together for Kids Coalition. Additional data will be captured in upcoming Community Health Assessments, but the team's priority is to



Emile Somda, M.D. (left) with Chief of Community Health Brendan Keenan, Ed.D. Somda leads the new office of Maternal & Child Health

facilitate a City-wide Fetal and Infant Mortality Review (FIMR), with the eventual aim to expand it to the other CMRPHA towns.

The ultimate goal of the FIMR is to determine causes of fetal and infant mortality and propose policies and other interventions to prevent them. Fetal mortality refers to adverse pregnancies, and infant mortality is a death that occurs between birth and just before a child's first birthday.

Currently, the Maternal & Child Health team is developing an FIMR committee and navigating existing data collection frameworks. Eventually, a formal review process will be put in place, and a case review team and community action team will collect quantitative and qualitative data to inform how to most effectively address causes of mortality.

"Eventually, we want to improve systems and establish preventative supports to assist new parents and their children. At the moment, we are taking small, careful steps to

create an effective process as we build the team and ensure the right voices are at the table. Our community partners have been very welcoming and eager to work with us," said Somda.

One of those community partners is the WHBC, which presented fetal and infant mortality data collected to date, including periods of risk and racial disparities, to the Worcester Board of Health at its April 2023 meeting. Somda said that the FIMR's data will include racial disparities that will inform tailored intervention and advocacy design. There is also a concerted effort to establish a diverse committee to drive the FIMR forward.

Before joining WDPH in a full-time capacity, Somda served there as an epidemiology intern as part of his Master of Public Health candidacy at University of Massachusetts Amherst, which he is on track to complete this May. Somda previously graduated from medical school in Burkina Faso, where he worked in pediatrics and coordinated both a new mother breastfeeding committee and an infectious disease prevention committee.

"Emile has hit the ground running, and he has been able to accelerate the new team's work with his extensive medical background and having previously worked with mothers as a physician. He's a perfect fit to lead this work moving forward," said Chief of Community Health Brendan Keenan, Ed.D.

Somda is joined by Maternal & Child Health Specialist Michelle Horne, who has an extensive background in early childhood (including infant) development evaluation and intervention.

Behavioral Health team partnering with school districts

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munity Health will begin meeting quarterly with superintendents from Worcester, Shrewsbury, and Grafton. This collaboration will ensure that the municipalities are not working in siloes and will encourage open communication and sharing of resources and lesson learned.

At the same time, each municipality has unique student demographics and systems in place that require tailored approaches and collaborative efforts to effectively address the identified health challenges and develop sustainable solutions.

“Our aim is not to go into a district, do one event, share information, and leave. We want to work in collaboration with the schools to bring about long-term improvements. To reach that goal, we need to involve community leaders to get buy-in from residents, students, and other officials, which will in turn increase the likelihood that the work can be sustained,” said Nakijoba.

To that end, the Behavioral Health team, led by Nakijoba and Tobacco Prevention Specialist Cherry Tangri, are deploying a variety of strategies.

In Shrewsbury, they are working with the School Wellness Advisory Council (SWAC), which meets regularly and aims to identify the school district’s most pressing needs. Currently, those include mental health and stress, particularly among the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as vaping. The Behavioral Health team is currently determining student age groups among which to conduct focus groups.

Mental health is also a priority in Grafton, where the team is working with the School Wellness Committee and is helping to re-convene the Coalition for Healthy Grafton. In addition to planning focus groups, they are working with adjustment councilors in schools to address mental health,



The Behavioral Health team was recognized by 508 Forever Young at a Holy Cross basketball game last season

which will be coupled with substance use prevention.

In Worcester, WDPH staff have met regularly with school leadership and are actively participating across 10 working groups set up to address topics such as health education and community involvement.

In October 2022, Nakijoba and Tangri presented to a health class at South High School and facilitated focus groups to identify sources of stress in students’ academic and personal lives. They also connected with a teen mothers’ group for another focus group. During these discussions, students are given the opportunity to ask questions and speak openly, and the Behavioral Health team seeks to equip them to be able to make informed health-decisions.

“We are trying to identify groups of youth we haven’t typically engaged with in the past. It will help us discern a wider breadth of needs and gaps for different populations. By establishing new relationships, we can engage and re-engage with them through multiple interviews and focus groups to better tailor interventions,” said Nakijoba.

They have also visited Forest Grove Middle School, where a student-led project related to vaping sought a community-based tobacco expert. Tangri answered the call, and she discussed with students the consequences of vaping, why it can be specifically problematic for teens, and policies around the issue.

To address concerns around vaping more widely, Tangri hopes to implement a district-wide “train the trainer” series for educators around the “CATCH My Breath” curriculum, a peer-reviewed, evidence-based youth vaping prevention program.

Outside of schools, the team is partnering with 508 Forever Young, an organization that runs basketball leagues for 5 – 15 year olds, along with weekly workshops that cover topics such as mental health, career development, racial justice, self-advocacy, and positive skill building and development. Nakijoba and Tangri have joined in to conduct the workshops and were recognized for their work by 508 Forever Young at College of the Holy Cross basketball games last season.



Have an idea for a story or event that might interest residents in CMRPHA municipalities?

[Please reach out to moorem@worcesterma.gov.](mailto:moorem@worcesterma.gov)

CMRPHA drills in preparation for future emergencies

One of the many public health concepts thrust into the spotlight by the COVID-19 pandemic was the staging of Emergency Dispensing Site (EDS), which are spaces where medical countermeasures—vaccines in the case of COVID-19—are distributed to individuals who may have been exposed to a health threat ranging from disease outbreaks to acts of terrorism and natural disasters. Other countermeasures can include antibiotics, antiviral drugs, and personal protective equipment.

On Wednesday, Jan. 25, Central Massachusetts Regional Public Health Alliance (CMRPHA) municipalities participated in an annual EDS drill at the Worcester Public Library’s COVID-19 vaccine clinic, with an eye on future response capability. The drill brought together staff from the Worcester Division of Public Health (WDPH) Nursing and Emergency Preparedness teams, along with a Medical Reserve Corps Unit Leader to represent volunteers. Utilizing supplies purchased for an EDS, the team conducted a walkthrough of the clinic space and discussed options for expansion, volunteer management, and clinical functions.

Beyond building situational preparedness, regular EDS planning is required for CMRPHA municipalities under the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) grant program. Facilitated at the national level by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the PHEP program is meant to strengthen each community’s ability to prepare for, and respond to, public health emergencies.

All states receive yearly PHEP funding and a corresponding set of deliverables from the CDC. In Massachusetts, a percentage of the funding and deliverables is then filtered down to the regional and local levels. Deliverables include writing EDS plans, and then testing those



The CMRPHA conducted annual EDS training at the Worcester Public Library COVID-19 vaccine clinic

plans by conducting drills. Each year, communities complete EDS set-up drills that include staffing, logistical, and operational components.

Chief of Emergency Preparedness Alissa Errede credited pre-pandemic drills for providing a layer of training

and knowledge that helped prepare the CMRPHA for COVID-19 pandemic response. This year, the CMRPHA communities decided to augment an existing vaccine clinic to fulfill the EDS set-up drill deliverable, and further prepare for future emergencies.



WDPH celebrates “Public Health Month” in April

This year, WDPH expanded its National Public Health Week activities into a month-long celebration of public health throughout April. As part of its outreach events, the community health team tabled at the Shrewsbury Police Department’s sensory-friendly First Annual Autism Awareness Touch-a-Truck event on April 20 (above).