



CITY OF WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS
Department of Health & Human Services
Division of Public Health



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

Matilde Castiel, MD
Health & Human Services
Commissioner

Karyn E. Clark
Public Health
Director

Date: March 9, 2022
To: Board of Health
From: Karyn E. Clark, Director of Public Health
Re: **Board of Health Meeting/WebEx Meeting Minutes March 7, 2022**

Welcome & Introductions

Meeting called to order at 6:39 PM

Members Present: Jerry Gurwitz, MD, Vice Chairman, Frances Anthes, Van Tran, MD, Gary Rosen; Absent: Chareese Allen

Staff Present: Karyn Clark, Director of Public Health, Michael Hirsh, MD, Medical Director, Matilde "Mattie" Castiel, MD, Commissioner of Health & Human Services

Guests: Pamela Callahan, Office of Human Resources

Approval of minutes from February 7 and February 16, 2022

Motion approved by Board of Health members.

Discussion of Open Meeting Law Complaint filed by Jordan Berg Powers

Board members discussed the specific violation and voted 4-0 to refer the complaint to the City Law Department to prepare and file a response.

Review & discussion of Robert's Rules and Open Meeting Law

Karyn introduced Pam Callahan from the City of Worcester's Human Resources Office to review Open Meeting Law, Roberts Rules, and Conflict of Interest.

Pam shares her presentation on the Introduction of the Conflict of Interest Law. The purpose of the law is to make sure private interests do not conflict with public obligation. Bribes and gifts should not be accepted, Board members should not be involved in matters brought to the Board by family members, and they cannot take any action that would affect their own, their family's or their business' financial interests.

Pam moves onto introducing the Open Meeting Law. This law allows the government to remain transparent and avoids secrecy. The agenda must be followed, there needs to be a recording and minutes taken, and the public should have access. With COVID numbers abating, in-person meetings may resume in April. There needs to be a notice issued at least 48 hours before a meeting excluding the weekend and holidays and the meeting needs to take place somewhere



that is accessible to the public. A public notice is not required in the case of an emergency meeting.

Pam continues her presentation and moves to Roberts Rules of Order. All business begins with a motion and a motion must be seconded.

Fran asks if the Chair is allowed to make or second a motion.

Pam is unsure and will follow up once she finds out. Continuing with the presentation Pam explains that the Chair can allow the public to speak and give them a time limit to do so.

Definitions of common phrases related to public meetings are presented to the Board.

Jerry thanks Pam for her presentation.

COVID-19 Updates and School K-12 Mask Mandate Presentation

Dr. Castiel shares a presentation with updates on COVID and the current vaccination status in Worcester.

- Waste water samples showed a peak in January. As we look to February 16th, the concentration of the virus in the waste water dropped. As of February 28th, the concentration of the virus dropped even further. There was an increase in concentration on March 2nd. The water needs to continue to be monitored to see if the numbers will continue to change.
- There was a peak in COVID cases for individuals aged 18-24.
- Between February 19th and 26th, 8.5% of fully vaccinated individuals were positive for COVID, .14% of fully vaccinated individuals were hospitalized, and .05% of fully vaccinated individuals died from COVID.
- Worcester County is 75% fully vaccinated. 56% of Worcester County has received their booster shot.
- Areas with high populations of people of color have had the highest numbers of COVID cases.
- Worcester is behind the state when it comes to vaccination. 83.3% of individuals in Worcester have received their first dose and 70.5% are fully vaccinated. In Massachusetts, 92.9% of the population has received their first dose and 80.1% are fully vaccinated.
- Numbers of those who are eligible to be vaccinated in Worcester aged 5-29 are below the percentages of vaccinated individuals aged 5-29 in the state of Massachusetts.
- The number of positive cases in Worcester Public Schools have decreased in both staff and students between January 27th and March 2nd. 49% of WPS students have received at least one dose.

Dr. Hirsh shares that currently the test positivity rate is between 2-3%. That is about 25 points lower than January 10th. We are seeing fewer healthcare workers getting sick. Hospitals are opening up again for elective surgeries and closing down COVID units.

- The CDC classified us as a low-spread community.
- DESE has cleared the school systems to go without the mask mandate (effective February 28, 2022), making them optional.
- The community level of disease is low enough right now where we are not concerned about children getting sick.
- We are down to 10.7 cases a day as opposed to 950 cases a day during the second week in January. We have not seen an uptick after school vacation or an uptick after removing the city wide mask mandate.

- We will be very vigilant. We feel very comfortable in the Division of Public Health and the Department of Health and Human Services to make the recommendation to rescind the school mask mandate.

Discussion

Dr. Gurwitz thanks Dr. Hirsh and Dr. Castiel for their presentation. He opens up the meeting to allow Board members to ask questions.

Fran asks Dr. Hirsh about the absentee rate in schools.

Dr. Hirsh and Dr. Castiel were not able to get those numbers. He received the number of positive cases in Worcester Public Schools. From February 10th-16th there were 73 cases (a 43% decrease) and from February 17th- March 2nd there were 41 cases (an additional 44% decrease). Fran has concerns about the gaps in unvaccinated kids. If the Board goes with Dr. Hirsh's recommendation, they would need to push child vaccinations and pay attention to what indicators to look out for. Fran asks what steps are being taken in schools to get children to get their vaccinations. Can school nurses give children vaccines?

Dr. Hirsh shares that there was a program during the school break to get children vaccinated.

School nurses are capable of giving the vaccines as well. Dr. Hirsh differs to Dr. Castiel.

Fran confirms with Dr. Castiel that according to her presentation there are neighborhoods that are more vulnerable. There needs to be a program in place to get children vaccinated if we are removing the mask mandate.

Dr. Castiel shares that Health and Human Services is working with Worcester Public Schools providing information on vaccination locations. There are plans to go to four schools next week to provide vaccinations to students. Permission slips were sent home with students previously to get permission from parents for the vaccine.

Fran asks if the Superintendent has weighed in on the recommendation to remove the mask mandate in schools.

Dr. Castiel does not know if the Superintendent has weighed in. Dr. Castiel sees that the numbers have decreased. Karyn confirms that the Superintendent supports our recommendation to rescind this mandate.

Gary recognizes what is being done out in the community to help the population. The most important thing we can do is get vaccinated. The numbers speak for themselves. The masks were never intended to be forever. The question is not whether children should be allowed to wear masks in school but if the City of Worcester should end the government mandated policy that they are required to wear a mask in school. Gary suggests voting to end the mask mandate in schools starting tomorrow. Students should have the choice to either wear a mask or take them off in school.

Dr. Tran believes that the current data is, if not encouraging, at least not alarming. It is hard for her to rationalize why masks would be required in schools and not in a stadium. The most vulnerable are the unvaccinated. Even if we roll back the mask mandate, we are asking that those who are unvaccinated to continue to wear masks. Dr. Tran is worried that students who choose to wear a mask may be bullied. Is it feasible to get children vaccinated and what can we do to make those students who are unvaccinated feel safe or comfortable wearing a mask in school?

Dr. Hirsh shares that he has spoken with Superintendent Maureen Binienda during a recent meeting and she stated that she would agree to removing the mask mandate in schools if by the time this Board of Health meeting took place, Dr. Hirsh still felt this way. Worcester Public Schools has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to bullying, which would protect students who may get bullied for wearing a mask once the mandate is lifted. We have been getting into the schools to vaccinate, but the issue has been getting parental consent.

Karyn comments on the members' concerns. There has been no stone left unturned by the Division of Public Health or Health and Human Services. We have been vaccinating for over two years. Worcester was one of twenty equity communities that received funding to continue to vaccinate the most vulnerable in our community. We have been in the community at times seven days a week for two years. Yes, the Superintendent is in favor of rescinding the mask mandate. Everything that we have done has been data driven. We use the data to make sure we are making informed decisions. Karyn as the Director of Public Health, Dr. Hirsh as the Medical Director, Dr. Castiel as the Commissioner of Health and Human Services, and the Superintendent are all saying tonight that they are in favor of rescinding the school mask mandate. But encourage anyone who wishes to continue to wear them to do so. No one should be bullied or mask shamed. The Shrewsbury Board of Health also had concerns about students being bullied for wearing a mask. We will work with the Superintendent to make sure that no one is bullied for their choice to wear a mask.

Dr. Castiel shares that there has been a lot of work to reach children to teach them about the vaccine and to encourage them to get the vaccine. There have been raffles, scholarships, youth ambassadors, videos, and billboards in an effort to reach the youth.

Dr. Gurwitz is comforted by what he heard from Dr. Castiel about how the department is going out into the community to get the younger population vaccinated.

Dr. Gurwitz asks for another member on the Board to move the motion that states the Board of Health emergency regulation requiring face coverings in all public, private, parochial and charter schools in the City of Worcester effective September 17, 2021 be rescinded effective immediately.

Fran has concerns about removing the mandate immediately unless the anti-bullying initiatives have been put in place and permission slips have gone home.

Gary moves the motion.

Karyn states that the permission slips have gone home. We cannot speak on behalf of the Superintendent, but she knows for a fact that there is a strict policy in Worcester Public Schools and they have spoken about it. This vote is not a surprise to anyone at this point. Maybe a day or two can be given to allow schools to contact parents.

Fran asks for an amendment to rescind the mandate on March 10th.

Gary declines the amendment.

Dr. Gurwitz asks if there is a second to the motion.

Dr. Gurwitz seconds the motion to remove the mask mandate in schools effective immediately.

Dr. Tran stresses that masks are still recommended for those who are vulnerable. Data shows that vaccines are the best defense. Our rescension is not an endorsement of everyone taking their masks off. But the data is not alarming—we look backwards but we move forward.

Fran is asking for a second motion. Rescinding the mandate is one piece but we need to add a recommendation stating that people have a choice and those who are vulnerable should continue to wear masks.

Gary does not see the need for the second motion. The public is well aware that the Board recommends vaccination. The important motion tonight is to end the school mask mandate so students can go to school tomorrow without a mask on if they choose to.

Dr. Gurwitz asks the Board to vote on the motion.

Dr. Tran votes in favor of rescinding the school mask mandate.

Gary votes in favor of rescinding the school mask mandate.

Fran votes in favor of rescinding the school mask mandate.

Dr. Gurwitz votes in favor of rescinding the school mask mandate.

Motion passes 4-0.

Dr. Gurwitz asks if Fran would like to make an additional motion.

Fran moves that as the Board of Health they remind the community that masks are still a choice that might best be employed by anyone in one of the vulnerable statuses and anyone who is unvaccinated. The Board also encourages that as Worcester Public Schools implements this, they make a strong commitment to the idea of choice and they are aware of any bullying and making sure that it does not happen.

Dr. Tran seconds the motion.

Dr. Gurwitz states that the Board of Health wants to encourage anyone who wants to continue to wear a mask in any setting in the city to do so, but they are particularly concerned about bullying in schools of any children that continue to wear masks. They encourage the School Committee and School Department to have a program to address this issue.

Gary does not think the Board should have a second motion to vote on. They haven't ended masking, they have made it optional. He cannot support taking a vote to soften that decision.

Fran seconds the restated motion.

Dr. Tran votes in favor of the motion.

Fran votes in favor of the motion.

Gary votes against the motion.

Dr. Gurwitz votes in favor of the motion.

Motion passes 3-1.

Dr. Gurwitz suggests addressing the final agenda item during the next meeting.

Next Meeting/Topics

COVID-19 update

Revisit framework for how BOH does its work

Discuss what the Board of Health's role is

Next meeting will be Monday, April 4th, 2022 at 6:30 PM in person.

Adjourn 8:45 PM