

Holyoke Board of Health
 Monday, January 3, 2022 at 6:30 P.M.
 Holyoke, MA 01040
 ZOOM
Meeting Minutes

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MAR 28 2022

Holyoke City Clerk's
 Holyoke, MA

Attendance: Patricia A. Mertes, Chair
 Dr. Esteban A. Del Pilar-Morales, MD, Vice Chair
 Dalila Hyry-Dermith, Clerk
 Sean Gonsalves, RS, Health Director
 Mayor, Joshua A. Garcia
 Deborah Schaier, PHN
 Beatriz Colon, Head Clerk
 Sonia Pope, Principal, Holyoke Community Charter School
 David Gottsegen, MD, HPA, 150 Lower Westfield Rd., Holyoke, MA
 Mackenzie Gray PA-C, 271 Carew St., Springfield, MA 01104

Mrs. Patricia A. Mertes, Chair called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. Seconded by Ms. Hyry-Dermith and Dr. Del Pilar. She asked anyone making a public comment to please sign in their full name and address in the chat box. Participants will be given 2 minutes to speak. The Board will be listening but not commenting.

Public Comments

Dr. David Gottsegen, MD spoke about his pediatric experience at HPA and information literature on mask mandates. 18 of the published studies on the CDC website consistently show that wearing a mask cuts the risk of transmission of disease, decreases hospitalization and deaths. This included 8 public schools districts in Massachusetts involving 70 schools with over 33,000 students. The transmission rate from contact cases was cut from 11.7% with all masked students to 1.7%. This also involved sailors in submarines, studies from China, India, Arizona, 1 hair salon, airplanes, one German city, fifteen other states and Canada. In addition, universal mask mandates help the economy by preventing lock downs, closures and people staying home sick. It is estimated that if the United States instituted it, we could prevent economic losses of up to a trillion dollars during surges. Masks help prevent disease better than lock downs and school closures. Some of the side effects people complain about with mask mandates have been ruled out by recent studies except for intense exercise, which might be more difficult. Kids have had very few adverse effects. There is a study from Saudi Arabia but is based on poor data. The main article talks about masks during the influenza epidemics, but it doesn't mention any problems with wearing them. Another study talks about issues such as panic attacks in kids, increased epilepsy, problems with pregnancy, and increased headaches with N-95 masks. He's worn one for the last two years and hasn't had any problems. He's seen no issues with kids, doctors, or staff. In summary, the studies show that mask mandates increase the wearing of masks among the community, helps the economy, decreases hospitalization and deaths. We wear masks not only for ourselves but to help our neighbors and citizens.

Sonia Pope, Principal HCCS. The school is K-8 grade with 702 students. Cases have increased after the mask mandate was lifted. They have been trying to control the spread with students and teachers wearing masks, but parents are not wearing them, and kids get infected. This is affecting the school setting. It's hard to keep kids on campus when they're sick all the time and almost impossible to acquire knowledge and do state

examinations when they're not in school. Dr. Pope agrees with wearing masks and reinstating the mask mandate.

Mackenzie Gray, Surgical PA-C @ Mercy Medical Center. Thanked the Board for their work. He expressed his disappointment with the Mayor's decision to not institute a mask mandate prior to the Holidays; especially with the expectancy of the Omicron variant. He feels the decision to wait and see was naive and ill informed. The city has had thousands of visitors for holiday shopping at the mall. We've had director of hospitals calling for help. What could've been a tool to help prevent transmission has now led to countless cases of unchecked community spread. He's seen recent numbers that are not of OMICRON somewhere in the three-digit range. For every person that is positive, there are as many as three infected. Not having a mask mandate early on, which we know is effective in helping to prevent transmission, was negative to the city. Holyoke has unique characteristics but an ability to fight a pandemic is not one. The city knew what was coming but failed to act. We should allow data, doctors, and scientists to drive the policy and decision-making process. He believes having a mask mandate will allow the public to go back work, school, grocery shopping and do the things they need to do and feel safe. Even if I wear a mask but the people around me don't then I'm just protecting them. He hopes we listen to the doctors and studies. Mr. Gonsalves informed him that a city-wide mask mandate is the decision of the Board of Health not the Mayor.

Navae Rodriguez, Executive Director of Council on Aging could not attend the meeting but expressed her support for a Mask Mandate. Frank Dailey from the Boston Bud Factory also expressed his support for a Mask Mandate. His business already implemented the policy internally.

Consideration of the Mask Mandate. Mayor Garcia, Rory Casey and Mr. Gonsalves were able to send a city wide Robo-call on Friday with the same information from the state. These are the numbers from last reporting period available on Thursday. The data used is extrapolated from the state. The numbers are in two-week periods. 618 cases in a two-week period ending Dec 28. An increase of 34%. Over the previous two-week period of Dec 23 which is 460 cases. In the first reporting period of December 9; a 121% increase with 279 cases. The positivity percentage as of December 30, was 10% up from 7.5% in week prior 12-23-21. A 32% increase. 72% increase from the first reporting period in December which was at 5.8%. The average daily incident rate metric is 108.6. A 34% increase from our last reporting period, 12/23/2021, which was 80.9. 121% increase from first week of December. The large increase has also been seen in Springfield, West Springfield, Westfield, and Chicopee. Springfield has hit record highs for daily and weekly cases. It has also been the same for some small communities in Hampden County. Cases recorded in this last month are an all-time high for 2021. This was reported on the city's website and in the news. The city and the state have reached weekly highs. Most of the cases are among the unvaccinated, many are children. Some days we see 40-50 in a day. There was a day with 80 cases during the Holidays. Schools are inundated with cases and are trying to do the best to manage it. HPS expressed that it has been a struggle to staff and keep children consistently in the classroom. From the medical side we provided Holyoke Health Center with some at-home rapid tests. Many of their workers have been infected and are having a hard time getting staff to work. The increase in cases has led to an increase in demand of testing. The testing infrastructure in the state is very inundated with people trying to access it. The at-home tests were a good resource, but it also increased demand for testing. People are taking the test but are not sure if they are doing it right. Some have no symptoms but are positive and want to get re-tested. There has been record attendance at the testing site and lines have been cut off due to the traffic

hazards. Springfield's Mayor Sarno asked the National Guard to help in the testing sites. Resources here are abundant but they are not reaching out to the surrounding regions and people are driving into this area. They are also having trouble getting appointments. Eastfield Mall is seeing the same. Baystate has hit an all-time high for hospitalization rate. Holyoke Medical Center has advised people to avoid the ER for testing.

Mrs. Schaier agrees with Dr. Pope and Mr. Mackenzie and was in favor of masks since before Thanksgiving. Her concern this year is the flu. Last year there weren't many cases of flu. There is only one child with flu and COVID. Holyoke Medical Center currently has 20 COVID cases. About two were vaccinated. The majority of those hospitalized are not vaccinated. There were over 85 cases today. She received 20 pages from December 26, 2021 to January 2, 2022; each page has 20-30 cases. With the recent volume of cases the BOH no longer makes calls or mail out letters. A Robo-call is being used for contact tracing. This is a necessity right now. She had a caller that did not receive their lab results but did get the Robo-call.

Dr. Pope: HCCS has data and are trying to work it. When people doing the at-home test are positive they are not notifying the school; those numbers are not being counted. They are trying to get parents to inform the school with positive test results. They will then provide the numbers to the BOH. Also, there is people that might not be able to contact us. Since results from at-home tests don't need to be reported case numbers might be higher than we think.

Dr. Gottsegen. He's seen the mandate is unenforceable in every town and police not arresting people. A news article reads that officers will not issue tickets or do arrests but they are educating the public. There are also different kinds of masks: cloth, surgical, etc. Cloth masks limit large droplet spread up to 70% and smaller ones by 50%. With the new variance Dr. Fauci said we should all wear surgical mask. N-95 & KN-95 are the best, but data shows that any mask is better than no mask.

Mayor Garcia and Mr. Gonsalves have been working on getting the information out to the community to encourage residents to get tested, wear a mask, vaccinate, and get their boosters. He did not have the authority to implement a citywide mandate, but he made it mandatory throughout all public buildings in the city. He supports HPS receiver to have students return to school January 10, 2022 instead of this week. He is in full support masks mandate but has some concerns about enforcement. We have a responsibility to keep community safe and educate them. He sees a lot of residents wearing masks and hopes the mandate encourages other to do the same and help flatten the curve.

Mr. Gonsalves suggested using Springfield's mandate language if we were to implement a mask mandate. Some parts of this version were used in Westfield, Southampton and South Hadley. Longmeadow's is slightly different. It's a good idea to use what is already in place in the local area for consistency.

Ms. Mertes. The document was reduced but looks consistent with what was used before with only minor changes. Springfield's mandate that runs until March 4, 2022. The language will not affect public or private schools; but will sports activities, and indoor activities. Ms. Mertes asked if there is any value instituting an end date. South Hadley, Southampton, Westfield, Easthampton and Northampton don't have end dates. Numbers will be monitored and reviewed monthly, and decisions will be made as needed. Springfield is the only city with an end date. She wants to know if implementing an end date will be a good idea for availability reasons? He hopes this new surge will be over by

March 1, 2022 but there is a new variant coming up. He believes following numbers and monthly reviews will give more room and determinations will be made accordingly. He is glad the city kept a mask advisory. Last year there were hardly any flu and RSV cases. Masks work.

Ms. Hyry-Dermith does not want a specific date. The open date will give the BOH a chance to continue conversations with the community about the mask mandate. She asked what will be the community resources that will help enforcement if we vote to implement a mandate? The Mayor informed there are resources thru ARPA. He can meet with Mr. Gonsalves and talk about a strategic approach on how to use this resource. Mr. Gonsalves believes messaging and availability are the most practical. Make masks available and encourage people to wear them thru non- confrontational messaging. Mr. Gonsalves: enforcement of mask is extremely complicated and difficult. Springfield language considers businesses responsible for enforcement of the mandate. While this is most practical, it does put a lot of stress in the service industry employees getting them into confrontational situations. Health inspectors do not have the authority to cite individuals, demand identification or issue a ticket. That is why holding businesses responsible is what is used mostly. The BOH enforcement in the past two mandates has been very passive. We encouraged businesses to enforce, discussing complaints, making management aware, asking if they need signage or masks. He doesn't think aggressive individual enforcement is practical. NY City's police enforces mandates; this makes for uncomfortable footage. Those situations might do more harm than good encouraging people to wear masks.

Dr. Gottsegen is trying to convince the YMCA to require masks. The YMCA director will require it if the city does. He stopped going to the YMCA for the past couple of weeks. Mr. Gonsalves said that the HPS and sports leagues have been very good about wearing masks. He is not sure what is going on inside the YMCA.

Mr. Mertes proposed to implement a city-wide mask mandate and use Springfield's mandate language without the inclusion of an end date. The mandate will be in effect to begin Friday, January 6, 2022. This will be reviewed monthly consistent with the information offered by the state. Seconded by Ms. Hyry and Dr. Del Pilar. A press release will follow. Ms. Mertes thanked all the public speakers. Mrs. Schaier still wants to keep educating people about vaccination and masking. These measures don't mean one will not get COVID but will protect and lessen its effect.

The BOH research project "Evaluation of Access Bio CareStart (TM) rapid SARS-Co V-2 antigen test in asymptomatic individuals tested at a community mass-testing program in Western Massachusetts" was recently published in the European Medical Journal. 2,000 letters were sent out with a little under 1,000 participants. Mr. Gonsalves and Ryan Paxton were co-authors. He is very thankful to Harvard and Mass General Hospital Team and wants to continue building a relationship with them. They are waiting on results verifications of the rapid tests for a draft before publishing it. Is great for the city to get the recognition and a wonderful resource. Mr. Paxton along with others involved in the study delivered test kits and collected data during the peak season of the pandemic. As a director he provided a place for the study and is proud to be involved in it.

The Holyoke Mall will be hosting COVID vaccine clinics on Saturdays during January 2022 and possibly longer. All three vaccine doses and pediatric doses will be offered. It will be in the upper level across from Billy Bees and will be hosted by Cataldo Ambulance offered by state.

Holyoke Library will host a vaccine onsite on January 8 or after. Action Ambulance has extra doses of Moderna and may be host a clinic at the Holyoke Senior Center. Testing continues to be a challenge and the state is struggling to meet the demand. There is an increase demand for testing. Testing sites have been experiencing long lines with multiple persons in the vehicles but there is not enough time to test everyone.

Mrs. Schaier has been working with her for the past two years in cases and during weekends. Ms. Giraldo is a valuable asset to the department. She hopes that with the availability of at-home tests the need for PCR tests will plateau after holidays and the mall closing earlier. Do children have get tested before college and schools begin? DESE has strongly discouraged testing prior to returning to school because they believe it creates a barrier to learning. She has received calls from parents getting children tested.

Dank Farm-Eric Frary notified BOH they are moving and taking their farm and goats with them. They will not be producing any dairy products in the city of Holyoke.

Mrs. Schaier asked if people will be recognized as fully vaccinated after the two doses or after the booster? In Dr. Del Pilar's opinion if it has been six months since the original last dose then you are not fully vaccinated. The person is vaccinated but not fully protected. The CDC created a problem with the 5-day guidelines. The state is still discussing it and trying to clarify the language. A lot of the staff in Baystate is out due to COVID. They are 20% over capacity and 14% understaffed. This is not sustainable in the long run. The CDC recommendation is the minimum. If an employer wants to create an internal policy, they can do so. Dr. Gottsegen informed that HPS made a group policy to be fully vaccinated and must come back asymptomatic and a negative test. Rapid tests are accepted.

Mrs. Mertes adjourned meeting at 7:31p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Dalila Hyry-Dermith, Clerk

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