

**BOARD OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEETING**  
**Meeting Minutes for February 8, 2022**

**Members Present:**

Misael Rodriguez, M.D., Secretary  
Major General Thomas M. Carden, Jr.  
Kathryn Cheek, M.D., F.A.A.P.  
Robert Cowles III, M.D., F.A.C.S  
Cynthia A. Mercer, M.D.  
Sangmin Ryan Shin, M.D., M.A., F.A.A.O.S.  
Tamica Valliere-White, M.D., F.A.C.S

**Members Absent:**

James Curran, M.D., M.P.H., Chair  
John Hauptert, F.A.C.H.E., Vice Chair

The Board of Public Health held its monthly meeting on February 8, 2022. The meeting was a virtual meeting and was led by Secretary Misael Rodriguez, M.D. An agenda and a list of attendees are attached hereto and made official parts of these minutes.

I. Call to Order and Roll Call:

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. by Dr. Rodriguez, following a roll call, all members were present except Dr. Curran and Mr. Hauptert.

II. Approval/Adoption of Minutes:

Dr. Rodriguez presented the minutes of the January 11, 2022, board meeting for discussion and approval. There was no discussion. The minutes passed unanimously.

III. Commissioner's Report:

Commissioner Toomey opened by welcoming back Megan Andrews, J.D. from the Office of Government Relations. The Commissioner then turned the meeting over to the presenters.

IV. New Business:

A. 2022 Legislative Session Update- Megan Andrews, J.D., Office of Government Relations

Megan Andrews, Assistant Commissioner for Policy, began her presentation by giving an overview of the legislative schedule. Today is day 13 of 40 days in the legislative session. March 15 is Crossover Day when any piece of legislation that does not cross over from one chamber to the other chamber is considered dead. She said the last day of session or Sine Die is set for April 4.

Currently, there are 162 bills under consideration in the legislature of which 56 bills are direct impact on DPH. If passed, these direct impact bills will require the agency to change its operations or require that a new program is implemented. There are four DPH agency bills that have been introduced:

**EMS – Retention of Fingerprints (SB 404)**

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation would be authorized to retain fingerprints of emergency medical services personnel and other applicant information in the GBI's registry so the Department of Public Health can participate in a program allowing ongoing review of the individual's criminal history.

**Childhood Lead Exposure (HB 1355)**

Georgia law would be updated to comport with the current CDC and EPA guidelines for blood lead levels. This would lead to a more robust program for identifying and preventing cases of lead poisoning in Georgia.

**Smoke-Free Air Act (HB 1348)**

Georgia law would be updated to prohibit e-cigarettes in locations where traditional smoking is prohibited. This will help protect the health of the public from the secondhand aerosol of vapor products.

**Filming in Health Facilities**

Patients or guests would not be photographed, video recorded, audio recorded, or otherwise imaged within a public or private healthcare facility without their consent, unless certain exceptions apply.

B. Epidemiology Update: COVID-19- Cherie Drenzek, D.V.M., M.S.

Cherie Drenzek, State Epidemiologist and Chief Science Officer, provided a brief update of COVID-19 in Georgia. During her overview she said that there have been more than 2.4 million COVID cases, more than 104k hospitalizations and more than 33k deaths in the state. Over the last two months, Georgia has continued to experience the Omicron variant surge. In early December and January, the daily COVID cases ranged from 1,500 to 25,000 cases a day. Most outbreaks were in K-12 schools, daycare facilities, and 10% of the outbreaks were in prisons. However, recently case numbers have declined by 51%, down by 4,000 a day. Surveillance indicators show that transmission in Georgia outbreaks has decreased as well.

Dr. Drenzek said that during the Omicron surge hospitalization numbers increased greatly but have since declined by 50%. Although the number of patients in hospitals have lessened, deaths aren't declining yet, in fact they are increasing. She said that despite the

increase in breakthrough infections due to Omicron, most of the deaths are among unvaccinated individuals. Fortunately, 55% of the Georgia population is fully vaccinated and 21% of the vaccinated have had their booster doses.

Dr. Drenzek said this pandemic is not over; and if we want to continue to see declines vaccinations, boosters, masks, and isolation are critical.

C. COVID-19 Therapeutics – Alexander Millman, M.D.

Alexander Millman M.D., Chief Medical Officer, gave an update on monoclonal antibodies and antivirals. He shared that on January 24, 2022, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) confirmed that there were two monoclonal antibody treatments for COVID that were not authorized for use due to the limited effectiveness against the Omicron variant. Those treatments were bam/ete and Regen-COV. Currently the only monoclonal antibody treatment that has maintained effectiveness is sotrovimab. This therapeutic treatment is to be used for non-hospitalized individuals with mild to moderate COVID and at high risk for severe illness. Dr. Millman also said patients can get remdesivir, Paxlovid, and molnupiravir antivirals if they demonstrate mild to moderate COVID-19 symptoms.

As of right now, availability of monoclonal antibodies and oral antibodies is extremely limited nationally. Sotrovimab is on a weekly allocation cycle and oral antivirals are on a two-week allocation cycle. Due to the limited supply of sotrovimab, hospitals and long-term health care facilities are prioritized for allocations. Because remdesivir is not distributed federally, it can be purchased directly.

Concluding, Dr. Millman stated that DPH has partnered with Walmart, Walgreens, and Good Neighbor Pharmacy Group to ensure state-wide access to oral antivirals. He also said that since the initial rollout, the number of pharmacy locations in urban and rural areas have increased. Additionally, work has been done to improve access to antivirals to high-risk populations in the Department of Corrections facilities and long-term care facilities.

D. COVID Vaccination and Testing – Chris Rustin, Dr. P.H., M.S., R.E.H.S.

Chris Rustin, Senior Advisor to the Commissioner, provided an update on covid vaccination and testing. Currently, Georgia has administered over 14 million vaccines of which 6.4 million people have received their first dose, and 5.6 million of the people are fully vaccinated. He said that because Pfizer was the first vaccine approved, most of the population has taken this vaccine. He said that Pfizer has initiated a submission for an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) of COVID vaccines in children aged six months to four years of age. The FDA is scheduled to review the Pfizer EUA application for children on February 15. Dr. Rustin said that Moderna has been granted full licensure for children 18 years and older and the brand of the vaccine is called SpikeVax. Recently a new protein

based COVID vaccine by the name of Novavax has been developed and submitted to the FDA for approval. This vaccine is a purified protein antigen derived from the spike protein.

Continuing, Dr. Rustin shared that DPH has partnered with long-term care facilities and jails and correctional facilities to provide vaccination and testing. In long-term care facilities, 73% percent of residents have had booster doses and 31.6% of the staff have had theirs. More than 144 jails and correctional facilities have participated in the vaccination and testing program and have administered 40,038 vaccines. Additionally, DPH has distributed 1.8 million rapid tests to long-term care facilities and correctional facilities.

Dr. Rustin went on to say that DPH has a State Covid Call Center. He said that this virtual call center has been in place since 2021. The operation consists of 97 agents who provide services seven days a week, including holidays. All agents answer general questions related to vaccines and boosters, and if a question cannot be answered, the caller is directed to the appropriate person for answers. Vaccine scheduling services are also offered by the agents.

Dr. Rustin also added that DPH has organized 175 specimen point of collection (SPOC) sites statewide. In addition to these sites, 18 surge sites and three mega testing sites have been added due to the Omicron wave.

DPH is continuing the statewide school testing program. This program allows K-12 schools to work with a lab to provide COVID testing to students, faculty, staff, and family members. Currently there are 189 schools enrolled. In January alone, 26 new schools joined the program.

#### V. Board Comments

Dr. Cowles asked Dr. Drenzek to define up to date vaccination. Dr. Drenzek said the CDC defines it as individuals who have had a primary two dose series plus a booster. As soon as you get your booster you become up to date.

Dr. Cheek wanted to know as we move forward with vaccinating younger children six months and above how are we anticipating the new rollout of vaccines? Dr. Rustin said, DPH is currently partnering with pediatricians and encouraging all providers that are VFC providers to enroll as COVID providers.

#### VI. Additional Comments

Commissioner Toomey gave the closing remarks by sharing her concerns about the possibility of losing childhood immunization mandates. She said there has been so much negativity about mandates, vaccines, and COVID that it has worked its way into childhood

immunizations. Dr. Toomey said that DPH and leaders in the medical field need to remind parents and lawmakers of the importance of children getting vaccinated.

VII. Adjournment:

There being no further business to be brought before the board, Dr. Rodriguez motioned for adjournment of the meeting. The motion passed unanimously. Dr. Rodriguez adjourned the meeting at 2:13 p.m.

THESE MINUTES ARE HEREBY APPROVED AND ADOPTED THIS THE 8<sup>th</sup> DAY OF MARCH 2022.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "James Curran", is written above a horizontal line.

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James Curran, MD, MPH  
Chair

Official Attachments:

1. List of Attendees
2. Agenda

**February 8, 2022**

**Board of Public Health Meeting Attendees**

**Board Members**

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**Attendees**

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Public virtual meeting.