

BOARD OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEETING
Meeting Minutes for January 14, 2025

Members Present:

Mitch Rodriguez, M.D., Vice Chair
Mychal Walker Sr., C.L.T.C., F.R.C., Secretary
Kathryn Cheek, M.D., F.A.A.P.
Lucky Jain, M.D., M.B.A.
Gregory E. Lang, Ph.D.
Cynthia A. Mercer, M.D.
Tai Valliere-White, M.D., F.A.C.S.
Sangmin Ryan Shin, M.D., M.A., F.A.A.O.S.

Members Absent:

James Curran, M.D., M.P.H., Chair

The Board of Public Health held its monthly meeting on January 14, 2025. The meeting was virtual and led by Dr. Mitch Rodriguez. The list of attendees is attached hereto and made an official part of these minutes.

I. & II. Call to Order and Roll Call:

The meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. The meeting commenced with Dr. Rodriguez asking Mr. Walker to conduct the roll call.

III. Approval/Adoption of Minutes:

Dr. Rodriguez presented the board meeting minutes of November 12, 2024, for discussion and approval. There was no discussion. The minutes passed unanimously.

IV. New Business:

A. Opening Remarks - Commissioner Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H.

Dr. Kathleen Toomey began the meeting by noting the recording of the session and expressing excitement about introducing new staff members. She invited Dr. Rustin to introduce the new Director of the Division of Health Protection, Jason Ellington. Dr. Rustin shared Mr. Ellington's extensive background, including 35 years of experience, service in the military and Georgia National Guard, and expertise in emergency response. Mr. Ellington's role will oversee critical programs such as emergency preparedness, healthcare preparedness, opioid prevention, EMS trauma, and injury prevention.

Mr. Ellington expressed his gratitude and enthusiasm for the opportunity, acknowledging the challenges and adventures ahead. Dr. Toomey concluded the segment by mentioning her anticipation for receiving an award and thanked the attendees.

B. Award Presentation - 2024 recipient the James A. "Bud" Cody Award – Derek Marchman and Ian Caraway

Derek Marchman and Ian Caraway presented Dr. Kathleen Toomey with the James "Bud" Cody Award, recognizing her for her lifetime achievements, community impact, and leadership during special events, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Marchman highlighted Dr. Toomey's

significant contributions, from her early career to her guidance during the pandemic, which earned her the nomination from Caraway, representing the Governor's office.

Marchman shared the legacy of his father, Bud Cody, a pioneer in public safety and community initiatives, emphasizing the alignment of Dr. Toomey's work with Cody's values. Dr. Toomey expressed deep gratitude, reflecting on her collaboration with law enforcement and public safety agencies, especially during 9/11 and the pandemic. She appreciated the recognition from both the Governor's office and the law enforcement community. Plans were mentioned to formally present the award at the Capitol with photos.

During the Q&A session following the presentation of the James "Bud" Cody Award to Dr. Kathleen Toomey, board members expressed their congratulations and gratitude for her leadership. Dr. Rodriguez extended the board's collective congratulations for the well-deserved recognition. Dr. Jain, representing a large healthcare system in Georgia, reflected on Dr. Toomey's significant contributions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Jain praised her collaboration with healthcare systems statewide, highlighting her role as an ally who consistently understood and supported their needs. Dr. Toomey's partnership and leadership were warmly appreciated.

C. Epidemiology Update – Cherie L. Drenzek, D.V.M., M.S.

Dr. Cherie Drenzek provided an epidemiology update focused on the current respiratory virus season, which includes influenza, RSV, and COVID-19. She emphasized that while respiratory viruses are ever-changing and unpredictable, surveillance tools like epidemiology and genomic monitoring guide public health efforts in prevention and control. Nationally, influenza is the primary driver of respiratory-related emergency visits, followed by COVID-19 and RSV, with similar trends observed in Georgia. However, RSV activity in Georgia peaked in December and is now declining, unlike national trends.

The update highlighted key demographic insights and healthcare impacts. Most hospitalizations for respiratory viruses occur among individuals aged 65 and older, and COVID-19 remains the leading cause of virus-related deaths, despite record-low numbers compared to previous years. Dr. Drenzek stressed the importance of vaccinations, noting that seniors are advised to receive two COVID-19 boosters and that flu vaccines remain effective even late in the season. The presentation also underscored the need for ongoing genomic surveillance to monitor emerging variants like the current COVID-19 XEC subvariant, which is effectively addressed by existing vaccines.

Dr. Drenzek concluded by discussing the broader implications of the respiratory virus season on healthcare systems, highlighting the importance of surveillance in resource allocation and public health planning. She encouraged widespread vaccination against the Big Three viruses and emphasized that continued vigilance and prevention strategies are critical to managing the seasonal impact of respiratory illnesses. The update reinforced the value of epidemiology in guiding effective public health responses.

During the Q&A following Dr. Drenzek's presentation, board members inquired about vaccination rates for at-risk populations for influenza, COVID-19, and RSV. Dr. Jain and Dr. Rodriguez both

raised this question, emphasizing the importance of monitoring vaccination coverage among vulnerable groups. Dr. Drenzek responded that these data are managed by the immunization program and offered to coordinate with them to share the information with the board. She also addressed a common seasonal question regarding the effectiveness of the flu vaccine, explaining that preliminary estimates are typically available in February.

Dr. Rodriguez expressed appreciation for the year-over-year comparisons presented in the update, noting their value in contextualizing current trends and alleviating concerns over seasonal upticks in activity. He highlighted how these comparisons help maintain perspective on public health responses. The board thanked Dr. Drenzek for her comprehensive update and the clarity provided in her responses.

D. Home Visitation Program Update – Diane Durrence, WHNP, MSN, MPH

Diane Durrence presented an update on the Home Visiting Program, a pilot initiative aimed at improving maternal and infant health outcomes, particularly in high-risk populations. The program targets women with chronic health conditions, pregnancy complications, mental health issues, substance use disorders, and other challenges. Launched in October 2023, the pilot initially served 21 counties and quickly expanded to 50 counties due to additional state and federal funding. By November 2024, the program enrolled 520 patients, completed over 2,000 home visits, and demonstrated promising outcomes, such as 90% postpartum visit completion within 8 weeks and high rates of term and normal-weight deliveries.

The program's home visits include comprehensive services such as monitoring maternal and infant health, addressing mental health needs, providing extensive education, and connecting participants to resources like transportation and mental health care. A significant focus is on personalized case management, including hands-on assistance with appointments and referrals. Challenges include limited access to mental health and substance use treatment, shortages of OB providers in rural areas, inadequate long-term housing options, and reluctance among some healthcare providers to refer patients to the program. Efforts to address these include developing outreach materials to better communicate the program's benefits.

Early results highlight the program's impact in supporting vulnerable populations and addressing critical gaps in maternal and infant care. The program has shown potential to reduce morbidity and mortality, improve pregnancy outcomes, and alleviate strain on healthcare systems. With continued expansion and refinement, the initiative is expected to significantly enhance maternal and infant health services across Georgia's rural and underserved communities.

The Q&A following Diane Durrence's presentation on the Home Visiting Program highlighted key areas for improvement and future growth. Dr. Mitch Rodriguez emphasized the importance of establishing consistent and measurable effectiveness metrics, noting that while preliminary data are encouraging, long-term outcomes like reduced maternal and infant mortality require years of observation. He called for secondary outcome tracking, such as breastfeeding rates and preterm delivery causes, to demonstrate program impact more quickly. Diane responded that an academic partner is already analyzing program data, with plans to compare outcomes to a control population to better demonstrate effectiveness.

Dr. Cindy Mercer raised concerns about sustaining and expanding the program beyond its pilot phase. She suggested identifying funding sources to transition the program into a long-term initiative and encouraged sharing compelling success stories to secure legislative support. Dr. Mercer also proposed leveraging a physician champion in each region to address provider reluctance to refer patients. Dr. Toomey echoed the importance of these anecdotes and revealed that a report detailing early successes and near-miss interventions had been shared with legislators, generating interest in program expansion.

Dr. Lucky Jain proposed integrating the Home Visiting Program into existing regional perinatal networks to maximize impact and scalability. He pointed out that these networks, which were once instrumental in reducing perinatal mortality, have become stagnant and could benefit from revitalization. Dr. Toomey and Dr. Mercer agreed, noting that enhancing these networks aligns with legislative priorities and the Georgia OB/GYN Society's efforts to restructure perinatal services. The discussion concluded with consensus on the program's potential to address maternal and infant health challenges, underscoring the need for sustained funding, better regional coordination, and targeted outreach.

E. Rabies Specimen Packaging and Shipping Training Program for Environmental Health Professionals – Galen C. Baxter, REHS, LSSGB

Galen Baxter's presentation outlined the Rabies Specimen Packaging and Shipping Training Program, developed to address significant safety and procedural gaps in handling rabies specimens. Prompted by a prior incident involving a leaking rabid animal head during shipping, the program aimed to standardize training for environmental health specialists responsible for packaging and shipping potentially infectious specimens. Rabies is a deadly virus transmitted through animal bites, with raccoons, skunks, and bats as primary reservoirs in the U.S. The program focused on creating a formalized training module to ensure compliance with Department of Transportation regulations and mitigate risks to staff and public health.

The training was conducted across 12 regional classes, successfully training 284 environmental health specialists. It included hands-on exercises, proper data entry in the state's disease surveillance system, and step-by-step demonstrations of packaging protocols. Trainees practiced packaging specimens to ensure understanding of procedures, including the use of appropriate stickers, paperwork, and safety measures for air shipping. The program revealed systemic issues such as incomplete shipping kits, improperly packaged specimens from external sources, and shipping company refusals to transport rabies-marked packages.

To address ongoing challenges, future steps include creating an online training video for new and existing staff, extending training to animal control officers and veterinarians, and improving communication between local and state offices and the Georgia Public Health Lab. These measures aim to ensure consistent protocols, address identified gaps, and prevent future safety incidents, underscoring the importance of robust training and collaboration in public health operations.

During the Q&A Dr. Mitch Rodriguez asked whether the program had already demonstrated improvements. Baxter confirmed that following the training completion in late 2023, the Georgia Public Health Lab observed better packaging and shipping practices for rabies specimens. This indicated a positive impact from the standardized training.

Dr. Rodriguez also inquired about the frequency of rabies specimen submissions for analysis. While exact figures were not provided during the discussion, Baxter and Dr. Toomey noted that the numbers are significant, with hundreds of specimens sent annually for testing. These include both cases involving animal bites, a notifiable condition, and specimens from animals exhibiting suspicious behavior in the community. Dr. Toomey emphasized that the updated Rabies Manual, revised in collaboration with various teams, includes the latest guidelines for handling human exposures and represents the most comprehensive program update in years.

The board expressed appreciation for the thorough presentation and the strides made in addressing gaps in the rabies program, recognizing the importance of such initiatives for public health and safety. The discussion underscored the value of continued monitoring and process improvements to maintain these enhanced standards.

F. Board Comments

During the final board comments and questions, Dr. Mitch Rodriguez inquired about receiving a legislative update regarding initiatives that will impact the Department of Public Health (DPH). Dr. Toomey assured the board that updates would be provided once the budget and legislative agenda are clarified, noting that the Governor's upcoming State of the State address might reveal relevant details. She shared optimism about potential legislative support for perinatal health initiatives, which she heard would be a priority.

Dr. Rodriguez reminded attendees that the next board meeting is scheduled for April 8, 2025, and asked for clarification on whether it would be held online. Dr. Toomey mentioned that she would provide updates, including sharing the perinatal health report, ahead of the next meeting.

V. Adjournment:

Dr. Rodriguez then moved to adjourn the meeting, which was seconded and agreed upon by all members. He extended New Year's well wishes to the board members and expressed hope for continued success and collaboration in the year ahead. The meeting was adjourned at 2:16 PM.

THESE MINUTES ARE HEREBY APPROVED AND ADOPTED THIS THE 14th of January 2025.



James Curran, M.D., M.P.H.
Chair



Mychal H. Walker
Secretary

Official Attachments:

1. List of Attendees
2. Agenda

January 14, 2025
Board of Public Health Meeting Attendees

Board Members

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Attendees

Public virtual meeting.