

**BOARD OF PUBLIC HEALTH MEETING**  
**Meeting Minutes for September 12, 2023**

**Members Present:**

James Curran, M.D., M.P.H., Chair  
Mitch Rodriguez, M.D., Secretary  
Cynthia A. Mercer, M.D.  
Sangmin Ryan Shin, M.D., M.A., F.A.A.O.S.  
Kathryn Cheek, M.D., F.A.A.P.  
Tai Valliere-White, M.D., F.A.C.S.  
Major General Thomas M. Carden, Jr.

**Members Absent:**

John Hauptert, F.A.C.H.E., Vice Chair  
Mychal Walker Sr., C.L.T.C., F.R.C.

The Board of Public Health held its monthly meeting September 12, 2023. 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 1:03 p.m. by Dr. Rodriguez, following a roll call, in conformity the members absent were Mr. Hauptert and Mr. Walker.

**III. Approval/Adoption of Minutes:**

Dr. Rodriguez presented the board meeting minutes of August 8, 2023 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. Toomey aims to make the board agenda more engaging by incorporating topics of interest to its members and highlighting current issues. She highlighted the recent preparations for an upcoming hurricane in the state and noted that while GEMA and Emergency Management's activities during emergencies are well-known, the board members may not be fully aware of public health's role in planning, preparing, and mitigating the storm's impact on human health. Dr. Toomey suggests that discussing this topic would shed light on the crucial behind-the-scenes efforts of public health.

**B. Epidemiology Updates – Cherie L. Drenzek, D.V.M., M.S.**

Dr. Drenzek addressed the upcoming respiratory virus season, specifically discussing COVID-19, RSV, and influenza. Dr. Drenzek introduced the idea of a "triple demic" where all three viruses peak at once, putting pressure on hospitals. Despite this concern, the severity of the season is still unknown. In regard to each virus, Dr. Drenzek provided an overview of their current status, noting a slight increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths but stating they remain lower than previous surges. Additionally, circulating variants, including the dominant strain and BA.2.86, were discussed, with Dr. Drenzek indicating that the new variant is not believed to be more contagious and that existing vaccines should offer protection.

Moving on to RSV, Dr. Drenzek mentioned the development of a new vaccine for infants and adults over 60. Finally, early influenza activity was addressed, with Dr. Drenzek stressing the importance of vaccination although it is still too early to determine the severity of the upcoming season. In conclusion, Dr. Drenzek emphasized the availability of preventive measures for all three viruses and urged their widespread use to avoid a triple demic and reduce the burden on healthcare systems.

Dr. Curran asked how do we combat differentiating opinions circulating in the public about the booster when so many famous and notable voices are saying they won't take the booster?

Dr. Drenzek said that the phrasing around boosting may change over time and doubled down on the fact that the vaccine lessens the symptoms of COVID-19 and that's the message we should be adhering to. She also said that it is being discussed should the term COVID booster be replaced with an annual message like the flu vaccine.

Dr. Curran said that last year fewer people over 65 got the booster and this year with the lukewarm differences of opinion that people getting the new vaccine will be even less.

Dr. Toomey asked what should we do in preparation for that type of response? How should we change our messaging to the public concerning COVID-19 and explain the benefits of getting the vaccine?

Dr. Curran agreed that calling it an annual shot like the flu shot is good, but the CDC should explain the difference between boosters but isn't sure if that will happen. He said that we should be as clear as we can in our message and be ready to answer the questions about why some people are deciding against it.

### **C. Injury Prevention in Georgia – Lisa Dawson, M.P.H.**

During her presentation, Lisa Dawson sheds light on the burden of injury and the efforts of the Department of Public Health (DPH) and the Injury Prevention Research Center at Emory University. Lisa highlights the prevalence of unintentional injuries, homicides, and suicides in Georgia, particularly among those aged 1 to 44. DPH has implemented various programs, such as safe sleep for infants, transportation safety, and dementia prevention for the 55+ population, to tackle different causes of injury. Collaborating with Emory University and other partners has been crucial in reducing Georgia's injury death rate.

Lisa also emphasizes the significance of preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) by partnering with the Essentials for Childhood Program and using data analysis and evaluation tools provided by the Injury Prevention Research Center. The focus moving forward will be on promoting health equity, implementing evidence-based interventions, supporting disproportionately affected communities, and increasing engagement across different platforms.

In conclusion, Lisa mentions task forces on traumatic brain injury, drug safety, violence prevention, transportation safety, and fall prevention. She also highlights the efforts to empower Community Partners in violence prevention through data literacy and training support. The joint strategic planning grid and logic model developed with Emory's Injury Prevention Research

Center will guide DPH's efforts to promote health equity and serve as the model for DPH's accreditation documentation.

**D. Emergency Preparedness – Chris Rustin, DrPH, M.S., REHS, Leah Hoffacker, MPS, EMHP**

During the presentation, Dr. Rustin outlined the emergency preparedness programs and activities carried out by the health department. These programs fall under three categories: public health emergency preparedness, city readiness initiative, and healthcare preparedness, and they are funded by CDC and HHS. The primary focus of these programs is to bolster the public health system, respond to emergencies, including bioterrorism events, and support hospital preparedness.

To ensure the success of these programs, the department conducts regular meetings, liaises with various agencies, and collaborates with other departments and state agencies. The warehouse facility, which stores medical supplies and equipment, is a critical component of the emergency preparedness plan.

Dr. Rustin also spoke about hurricane season preparedness and how the department closely monitors weather services while collaborating with FEMA's meteorologists. They plan for medical support, sheltering, transportation, and healthcare facility support during emergencies. The department has also developed plans for medical support shelters and evacuation shelter planning.

Dr. Rustin shared the impact of Hurricane Idalia in South Georgia, specifically in the Valdosta region. He discussed how the health department worked closely with their coalitions, activated patient placement boards, and dispatched environmental health staff to inspect and reopen restaurants in affected areas. The shelters were staffed by public health nurses and Red Cross staff, and Dr. Rustin commended the response and teamwork of the Valdosta team. He emphasized the ongoing preparedness efforts of the health department and the important role of their behind-the-scenes teams in coordinating emergency response activities across the state.

Dr. Curran emphasized the importance of the training that's done between emergencies - if training isn't done then no one is ready to fulfill their role in an emergency. He asked for any other comments or questions in which Major General Carden commented that he appreciated what Dr. Rustin, and his team does to prepare for and respond to emergencies.

**E. Closing Comments - Commissioner Kathleen E. Toomey, M.D., M.P.H.**

Dr. Toomey said that the next meeting will be held in person although some board members may wish to participate online. She hopes that it will mitigate some of the technical challenges that occurred online during the meeting. Dr. Toomey had no other closing comments and thanked everyone for their support and help. Dr. Curran asked for any other comments in which there were none.

**V. Adjournment:**

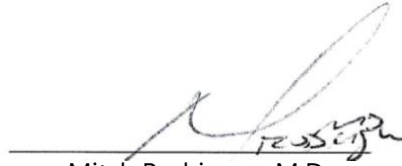
There being no further business to be brought before the board, Dr. Curran motioned for adjournment of the meeting. The motion passed unanimously. The meeting was adjourned at 2:25 PM. The next meeting is scheduled for October 10, 2023, in person and or by Zoom.

THESE MINUTES ARE HEREBY APPROVED AND ADOPTED THIS THE 14th of November 2023.



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



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Mitch Rodriguez, M.D.  
Secretary

Official Attachments:

1. List of Attendees
2. Agenda

**September 12, 2023**  
**Board of Public Health Meeting Attendees**

**Board Members**

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**Attendees**

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Public virtual meeting.