



Town of Agawam Board of Health

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Gladys Fernandez-Largay, MD	- Chairman
Mary Jo Safford, NP	- Vice Chair
Mary Lee Bertrand, BSN	- Member
Michael Theroux	- Health Agent
Sherry Petrucci, RN	- Public Health Nurse
Beth Ceccarini	- Secretary

Meeting Minutes - January 19, 2022

Meeting held via ZOOM due to Novel Coronavirus

Attendance : Nurse Sherry Petrucci, absent

Documents distributed at meeting :

-Board of Health Agenda

Meeting Called to Order : 5:05 pm. Chairman Fernandez noted that based on COVID 19 active measures where meetings are concerned, meetings would continue to be virtual until April 1, 2022 by the Governor's Executive Order extending these measures.

Approval of minutes : A motion to approve the December 2021 BOH minutes was made by Vice Chair Safford and seconded by Chairman Fernandez. Motion to approve minutes: 2-0.

Citizen Speak Time : None called to get a BOH meeting invitation.

Old Business :

Sanitarian Position : Agent Theroux told the Board our new Sanitarian, Lauren Kennedy, started Tuesday. She came from West Springfield's Health Department. He told them she was already doing inspections and is pleased with her "jump-right-in" attitude. He feels she will be a great asset to the Department. The members commented on how productive it will be for our office, fully staffed, to know the Health Agent can distribute some of his workload weight to her which benefits the public greatly.

School Nurse Position : Health Agent Theroux noted the nurse hired to start in January declined the position a week before she was to start. She declined due to the pay scale. We are back to where we started and have posted the position again on the School Spring website. It seems to be problematic to get qualified nursing candidates to apply which is disappointing as that position has been vacant since August. The amount of money being spent on substitute nursing agencies and our own few sub nurses is substantially rising each week.

He also informed the Board the Mayor is strongly considering a move for the School Nurses from the Health Department to the School Department budget. Initially, that would require more licenses for them; but better overall for the nurses themselves with the role they fill in the schools.

17 Cambridge Street: There is still a court order in effect to keep most people out of the house. At the end of January there will be another court date with the judge to see what the status is and who can eventually go into the house. The house is still secured and no-one has access to it until the ownership issue is resolved. Members asked if the impending sale is still on for that property. Agent Theroux stated it looks good and hopefully the seller either through sale or probate will go through. They would like the potential buyer to be on the conference meeting with the judge.

New Business :

State Guidance / Contact Tracing : A few weeks ago, the State guidance on isolation and quarantine had changed. For vaccinated persons, there is 5 days isolation, followed by 5 days of strict mask wearing. We have continued to implement that policy for the public. DESE has kept the same guidance. If students or staff test positive they are isolating 5 days and wearing a mask all day (outside as well) for the next 5 days. DESE adopted the 5-day quarantine policy for the fully vaccinated. Clarifying that guidance would be anyone who has 2 doses of Moderna or Pfizer and 1 dose of J & J vaccine. Their objective is to try to keep the kids in schools.

Testing for COVID 19: We are still offering our “test & stay” program for those who are identified as close contacts in school. Parents can apply for our program (with consent on file for their child/children). The program consists of 5 days of testing 2 days of monitoring. If student or staff tested negative they could return to school that day. We are planning on going with the State’s new guidance where instead of that program; we will be giving testing kits to parents and staff that opt into testing at home. We are switching from doing close contact in schools to no contact tracing and only testing symptomatic students and staff in school. If students or staff feel ill at home before school starts then testing should be administered before they get on the bus and come to school. Symptomatic testing in school will be administered by the School Nurses. Parents can use the test kits at home if their child was labeled a close contact or start feeling unwell before school hours.

In our office, we have received testing kits for our town employees and have utilized quite a few already. We have been rapid testing with Binax NOW. We have administered to the DPW, Police, Building Maintenance and other town departments. The entire Health Department staff is administering tests! We test them, have them wait in their cars, call them with results. Now the Fire Department has gotten some tests as well so they will be testing Fire and Police personnel. The BOH members stated the list of tasks in the Health Department doesn’t seem to have an end. Agent Theroux agreed that all hands on deck for specific phases of this multi-phase pandemic. Chairman Fernandez told us all to keep safe as we continue with these tasks; it would be a detriment if the Health Department were to get sick. She gave us her continued thanks for the daily work done by all in the office.

Mary Lee Bertrand, member has joined the zoom call at 5:24 p.m.

Agent Theroux stated we practice safety protocols when testing and interacting with the public daily as well as all employees. He quickly updated Member Bertrand on the topic of Testing for COVID 19. He told the members we have been testing for a few weeks and it’s going well. Members asked if we had specific hours of testing. He responded we test all day long. Each department has different or multiple shifts, that aren’t just morning or afternoon only, so we need to be flexible with our testing.

The Health Agent asked the members about their thoughts on the value of continued contact tracing the adult population. Given the constant changing guidance, inability to reach positive person, their inability to give list of close contacts or most people already telling others they had a positive test seems very confusing to the general public. Members asked him if people who are contacts of positive cases are given guidance on what to do. He stated that is one of the purposes for the call was to educate them. One member stated that at this stage, almost like a phase 3 of the pandemic, most people are telling contacts themselves and looking up the current guidance more now than before. They are able to research that information on Mass.gov anytime. The Health Agent stated that it takes up a vast amount of time, money and resources to continue this practice to almost no avail. Agawam isn’t the only town going through this phase. Other towns are spending grant monies or hiring outside staff themselves to complete this mission. He told them one very big frustration and area of great concern is that the “at-home” tests (taken by the public), test positive and are NOT calling their local BOH’s to let them know that they are positive. Therefore a true case count will never be accurate nor will contact tracing be done. We seem to be re-affirming their positive test result and give them current guidance. It is frustrating from a Health Department stand point and seemingly less helpful. Another frustration is that PCR testing is at such a high volume; we aren’t getting results for 5-10 days. When results are received, isolation might be null and void meanwhile they go out and infect others. One member stated she sees how frustrating that can be from a health concern regarding infection control. She also sees two components of contact tracing: 1~ contacting them and extracting information from them, 2 ~ giving out proper guidance to them. Both components are getting harder and harder to do with continually up-dated guidance. All members agree with Health Agent that at this stage it is starting to phase out from the public’s perspective and interest in

helping, which is sad for overall public health. It should continue with school aged students and staff. They agreed that the Public Health Nurse hired from the tri-city grant should continue with the adults in the community until grant runs out. Agent Theroux noted that new guidance for schools is coming out next week. The School Department is not going to maintain the “test and stay” program anymore to find close contacts in school. The state has found that in-school transmission is not producing high case numbers. The School Nurses will now only test symptomatic students, then send them home with 2 test kits each to those who have opted into the at home testing program. They would test for 2 weeks.

School Nurse Activities : Nurses are only testing symptomatic students and staff.

If they are negative and they still have symptoms or a close contact they are sent to the test and stay program until the program ends. So negative tests will result in returning to class and positive symptomatic tests will be sent home. They have been very busy each day. Every school is encountering the same situations. We anticipated it was going to get super busy after Christmas break and it has been. When the new guidance comes out next week they will be updating students, parents and staff.

Public Health Nurse : Health Agent told the Board members the overall numbers have been steadily on the decline for the last couple weeks. After 2 weeks of data, our numbers were in the 300 count range for cases. With isolation down to 5 days, that number could be cut in half now.

One of our School Nurses, Pam Franco, has been filing in a couple days or half days a week for Sherry since November. She has been a big help with nursing issues, school aged cases and keeping up with the changing guidance, to disseminate information to the other school nurses. Unfortunately due to the amount of nursing absences and the current unfilled position, there are weeks she hasn't been in the Health Department as there was no substitute coverage for her school.

Board members asked Agent Theroux about reporting school cases of COVID 19 and places like nursing homes and elder care facilities. He noted it was up to each School Department and the elderly/nursing home facilities themselves to report all cases directly to the State.

Members stated again that if the Mayor put the school nursing responsibilities into the School Department then it would clearly work more efficiently with more accountability especially from a logistical stand point. Now would be the best time to actually follow through with this endeavor given their extra duties and workload during this pandemic setting. They noted the School Department may be able to better budget pay scales for them as well. Also noting if their direct supervisors were in the schools, the chain of command would work out better all the way around. Members asked the Health Agent how discipline worked for School Nurses if an incident were to occur. He told them some situations came up where he or Sherry were the last to know about it. When discussions by the nurses; parents, school principal, school secretary and superintendent had taken place, days may have lapsed. The Health Agent stated that it can be very frustrating finding out there was an issue after everyone else or days after the incident occurred. One member asked if the School Nurses were under the School Department umbrella if they really could increase their salary to attract the most qualified candidates to apply. Agent Theroux stated it would be up to the School Department and Superintendent through the negotiation process. It would be a great idea for them as the School Department does have a bigger budget than the Health Department. He noted the School Nurses would be meeting soon to discuss some of the pros and cons of switching entities. The Board members closed the meeting stating they are in agreement, and have always been in agreement, with the idea of the School Nurses in the School Department and hope the Mayor actually follows through. That would ensure better nurse selections, more accountability in all aspects, smoother chain of medications and medication issues as well as much better salaries for the qualified nurses themselves since their daily workload increases each year. Logistically it would be a sound move. The members didn't see a down side for the nurses stating it would be a good move especially during this time of medical uncertainty when the Health Department itself is overwhelmed with that and all other aspects of what the pandemic brings.

Agent Theroux thanked members Bertrand and Chairman Fernandez for reapplying for another term on the Board of Health. He told them he appreciates all their hard work and effort on behalf of the residents of Agawam. He stated there was more work to do which is why he was glad the Mayor approved both their re-appointments.

Adjourned: Motion to adjourn was made by Vice Chairman Safford seconded by Member Bertrand. With

a vote of 3-0, the meeting adjourned at 5:47 pm.

BOH/bc