



**Task Force of Border Health Officials (TFBHO) Meeting
HHSC Virtual Platform
October 13, 2022, Meeting Minutes**

Member Name	Yes	No	Professional Representatives (non-members)
Esmeralda Guajardo, MAHS		✓	
Richard Chamberlain, DrPH, MPH, RS	✓		
Steven M. Kotsatos, RS, CPM	✓		
Shannon Harvill	✓		
Eduardo Olivarez	✓		
Arturo Rodriguez, DNP, MPH, CPM	✓		
Hector Ocaranza, MD, MPH	✓		
Emilie Prot, DO, MPH	✓		
Lillian Ringsdorf, MD, MPH	✓		
Rachel E. Sonne, MD, MPH	✓		
State Representative Bobby Guerra		✓	
Senator Eddie Lucio Jr.		✓	

Attendees Present

Francesca Kupper, John Chacon, Karin Hopkins, John Villarreal, Dr. Allison Banicki, Cassandra Urrutia, Edith de Lafuente Gomez, Guillermo Zenizo, Úrsula Solórzano, Adriana Luevanos.

Agenda Item I: Call to Order, Welcome, Chair Remarks, Meeting Logistics and TFBHO Roll Call

Chair Olivarez welcomed attendees to the Task Force of Border Health Officials (TFBHO) meeting. He opened the meeting at 9:01 am. He welcomed members, attendees and noted appreciation of Dr. John Hellerstedt and congratulated him on his retirement. He also congratulated Dr. Jennifer Shufford in her new role as Interim Commissioner of Health. He asked Ms. Francesca Kupper to initiate the roll call. She introduced production staff, provided logistical announcements, proceeded with the roll call, and confirmed a quorum. Chair Olivarez continued with the meeting and asked for attendees to introduce themselves and he moved on to the next agenda item.

Agenda Item II: Consideration of July 7, 2022, Meeting Minutes

Chair Olivarez asked members to review the July 7, 2022, Meeting Minutes, and asked if any edits were requested. He requested for a motion to approve the meeting minutes. Dr.



Prot initiated a motion to approve the minutes; Dr. Rodriguez seconded the motion. Chair Olivarez asked Ms. Kupper to initiate a roll call vote to approve the meeting minutes. The motion carried and the minutes were approved. She turned the meeting back to Chair Olivarez.

Agenda Item IV: Maternal Child Health Subcommittee Leader

Chair Olivarez inadvertently skipped to agenda item IV and asked if Dr. Rodriguez would lead the Maternal Child Health Subcommittee; he accepted leadership role and they continued to agenda item III.

Agenda Item III: Update: COVID-19 Vaccines and boosters

Chair Olivarez introduced Mr. Tony Aragon, Immunization Unit Director (DSHS) who provided the COVID-19 Vaccine and booster update. To date, Texas and all its medical partners have administered more than 48 million doses, since COVID-19 vaccines were introduced. That equates to 21 million people vaccinated with at least one dose. People who are fully vaccinated equals about 18 million [at least two doses of Pfizer or Spikevax (formerly known as Moderna), or one dose of the Jansen vaccine.] Border counties lead the state with vaccination rates between 95-100 percent. Texas has done a credible job of administering more than 7 million vaccine boosters, but there is much room for improvement.

Vaccine rates for the adult population are good state-wide at about 80 percent. Rates drop considerably for residents under 18 years of age. For those 6 months – 11 years of age, 41 percent are fully vaccinated. For those between the ages 6 months - 4 years of age, only 6 percent have been fully vaccinated. Texas has done well with vaccination rates for those 12 years old and older; improvement is desired for younger children.

We plan to focus on improving booster dose rates for all ages, especially with new bi-valent booster dose, which has the Omicron subvariant component. As of yesterday, booster vaccines were approved for those aged between 5-11 for Pfizer and 6-11 for Spikevax (Moderna). Children who received the monovalent (standard) booster vaccine are now approved to receive the bi-valent vaccine after two months from their last booster dose. Bivalent vaccines will be made available with main pharmacy groups as early as this weekend throughout the state. Mr. Aragon asked members if they had any questions.

Chair Olivarez asked about the future of Covid vaccines and if they will become yearly doses or if they'll be combined with flu vaccines? Mr. Aragon explained that there are pharmaceutical companies that are studying the possibility of combining COVID vaccines with flu vaccines. That may be available next year. COVID vaccines in the future may evolve to a yearly dose, similar to flu.

Chair Olivarez also asked about different COVID variants as they continue to expand and evolve. Mr. Aragon explained that there may be different vaccine doses that may derive like the new bi-valent vaccine, which is a new formulation compared to the original formulation



of the mono-valent vaccine. That's likely to happen just like we experience with flu. Formulations are derived based on the occurrences that exist in northern and southern hemispheres, which is how the flu formulations are produced. That may happen with COVID as well; there may be different or new formulations, based on new variants or sub variants.

Dr. Prot asked about the CDC map. Locally, southern counties have gone from high to medium levels. How is the genotyping being done and where are the samples coming from? Because there have been new variants in Bangladesh and Singapore, we'd like to keep an eye on that to protect our border communities. Mr. Aragon stated that he didn't have information on genotyping, but he can ask colleagues about this to provide an update. He mentioned that border stakeholders can do what they can to promote vaccines and booster rates among the populations that are most at need for them along the border to add extra immunity.

Mr. Villarreal asked about the frequency of Moderna's new official name "Spikevax" that was announced earlier in the year. Mr. Aragon stated that while Spikevax is the official name, most still refer to it as Moderna.

Chair Olivarez mentioned how the Governor extended COVID's emergency response; Mr. Aragon agreed with Mr. Olivarez, stating that we're still in response mode.

Mr. Kotsatos asked about the Novavax vaccine. Mr. Aragon shared that he didn't have an update regarding the Novavax vaccine but there hadn't been a lot or researched received many updates on that particular vaccine.

Chair Olivarez spoke of continuing to access to COVID-related data in Hidalgo and Cameron Counties. We continue to work with medical societies, contact tracing reports so that we maintain vigilance. Dr. Prot also spoke of COVID surveillance continuing in communities to ensure the good work that's been done continues to be fruitful. Dr. Rodriguez also commended stakeholders and DSHS on grants and other efforts that feed from grassroots levels, including libraries and working in fire departments to workforce grant opportunities and how helpful its results have been regarding recovery and response efforts.

Chair Olivarez mentioned that vaccinations are part of culture and traditions and that it continues along the border. We've also had a good response from winter Texans in getting vaccinated. He also commented about a severe uptick in flu cases. For the next meeting, can you please provide a flu update as well? Mr. Aragon concurred that the state and CDC anticipates a higher than normal flu season. He added that during the pandemic, mitigating factors such as washing hands, masking and distancing were in full force throughout the state, which made flu rates drop. Because we have a decent level of immunity, people's guards have come down. He agreed to provide a flu update at the next meeting as well.

Dr. Sonne provided a flu update for West Texas. She reported case tracking already shows and elevated incidence and that we may have missed the onset of flu this early in the season. Additionally, the incidence of flu B usually appears later in the season. However, we are now seeing flu B in addition to flu A. Because of prior quarantine and isolation, flu rates



dropped but it's still a big concern because flu vaccines, good hygiene, etc. are still needed. Chair Olivarez thanked Dr. Sonne for her input and agreed that higher flu levels may be in likely in the near future.

Agenda Item V: Subcommittee Reporting

Chair Olivarez asked members to provide updates on each subcommittee (border public health priority). He welcomed a comment from Ms. Hopkins who announced that the Recommendations Report due on November 1, 2022, was recently published. She congratulated members for their hard work and dedication. Chair Olivarez thanked her for the good news and congratulated members and DSHS/HHSC staff on the achievement. He also thanked Ms. Guajardo on previous year's reports, especially during the pandemic. He continued with members of subcommittees who provided the updates below:

Public Health Infrastructure – Dr. Rodriguez noted that outreach efforts with other agencies were still in process. He mentioned that future project including HIE activities was still ongoing and that although there was nothing concrete to currently present; much progress is anticipated that will be reflected in the next report. Chair Olivarez highlighted success of subcommittee regarding vector control and applicator licenses lead to increased numbers of licensed applicators in several counties, which leads to improving public health related to mosquito-borne illnesses. Dr. Rodriguez noted that he can already see the fruit of this effort by lessening turnaround time for mosquito spraying amid staff shortages. Mr. Kotsatos also commented that his staff increased from 14 licensed applicators to 26 due to such efforts. Chair Olivarez also mentioned other related activities such as the partnership with UTRGV and other grant-focused initiatives that resulted in success for border communities in south Texas.

Environmental Health – Dr. Sonne mentioned priorities for the next biennium beginning with tire abatement options and how to best impact with community health. She thanked Mr. Villarreal for working with TCEQ and partnering jurisdictions across the border. She expressed interest in learning how they work and run so that it will impact related priorities. She also stated that they'd continue to pursue a route for sanitarian support. Mr. Villarreal commented that he had been approved to meet with the Texas Association of Regional Councils (TARC), the organization that works with all councils of governments (COGs), on behalf of the Environmental Health Subcommittee. He introduced the TFBHO to COG staff that were present at the TARC conference and conducted a presentation. He also introduced Dr. Rodriguez' idea of creating a tire abatement task force for the border and the idea of having border COGs meet yearly with the TFBHO. Chair Olivarez congratulated the Environmental Health Subcommittee for their efforts and continued success. He also commented that members consider another subcommittee to focus on illegal foods because cheeses, meats, produce products, pork, cabritos, are being confiscated due to them not being processed properly, so it's something to consider as a future subcommittee.

Communicable Diseases and Chronic Diseases – Dr. Prot reported that their last meeting met on September 28. Because both committees have the same members, she'd report on both subcommittees but mostly on communicable diseases. They spoke of arboviral



diseases, climate change, chagas and rickettsia-related diseases, and what's available to continue mosquito testing and surveillance efforts. They also discussed the rise in complicated TB cases and collaborating with the binational program. They also discussed defining the difference between travel and local cases in addition to drug-resistant cases. She also mentioned how diseases spread in congregate settings including detention centers or jails and finding creative ways to work within these settings. Zoonosis and communicable diseases and rapid lab identification and lessons learned during the pandemic. Chair Olivarez thanked Dr. Prot and agreed to promote vaccinations, since there has been an increase in waiver requests, which may lead to higher incidents of diseases we haven't dealt with in many years. He also referenced how stagnant vaccination funding has been as it hasn't increased in 15 years. He thanked her again and moved on to the next subcommittee.

Maternal Child Health – Because Dr. Rodriguez just took over this role today, there were no updates to report on, but he did ask Dr. Banicki to present on maternal child health-related data in the near future. Dr. Banicki stated that she'd be providing a full data update including factors that include maternal child health. Chair Olivarez requested if she'd consider including data from the Department of Homeland Security, since it may provide valuable input for border public health. He thanked members for their updates and announced that they'd be taking a 10-minute break.

Agenda Item VI: Opportunities for potential subcommittee initiatives and next steps

Chair Olivarez announced that the meeting had reconvened at 10:27 a.m. Ms. Francesca Kupper provided a roll call and advised Chair Olivarez to continue with the meeting. He mentioned that he had a conversation with Ms. Hopkins about Mexican counterparts who were concerned with rickettsia (tick-borne illnesses), and that in some cases, lead to death. He asked for member feedback and Dr. Sonne asked the Region 9/10 Veterinarian, Dr. Waldrup, to comment on the topic.

Dr. Ocaranza mentioned that the region works closely with health authorities from the state of Chihuahua regarding tick-borne diseases. They had some challenges acquiring the appropriate medications but that's been resolved. Their response has since improved. They continue to collaborate with them and the local university medical centers. They also work closely with secretariats of health in the state of Chihuahua.

Dr. Waldrup commented on rickettsia in the region, stating that they don't generally have tick-related diseases this far west within El Paso. He noted that as weather gets hotter, some ticks become less stringent in their host specificity. For example, some ticks that are usually associated with dogs have been found attacking livestock and humans. He was aware of related challenges in Mexico and is concerned about the issue.

Chair Olivarez agreed and stated that typhus is a related concern in the valley. It's an ongoing topic to discuss and work with local applicators and with the USDA.



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Dr. Rodriguez moved the conversation toward university collaborations and health informatics as it was similar to the recent HIE-related recommendation. A conversation he had with university staff dealt with bridging public health data with real time reporting. He mentioned that universities are looking for stakeholders to be part of this. Many Texas universities took part in this discussion, which included standardizing the flow of health data involving HL7, which is a platform that transfers data from one format to another. There is potential to collaborate with universities to explore what types of projects may be piloted.

Chair Olivarez agreed and asked about data collection involving Covid and co-morbidity issues and Covid response of border counties. Dr. Rodriguez and Mr. Kotsatos agreed that including university collaborations. Dr. Ocaranza commented that it's important to have a comparison of comorbidity and social determinants of health and why the border has higher vaccine compliance rates than the rest of the state. This might shed some light on how to support border cities regarding other diseases, HIE-related issues, informatics, and communication exchange with provides to support border cities. Chair Olivarez and Dr. Ocaranza support Dr. Banicki's role to reveal vulnerabilities and successes border wide. Mr. Villarreal noted the university collaborations regarding the registered sanitarian recommendation while Ms. Hopkins applauded efforts to link with academic institutions and mentioned that DSHS has a fellowship program, which places members in different local health departments. She encouraged members to take advantage of that program to assist with research at the local level.

Chair Olivarez noted his concern of the anti-vaccination movement, resulting in the reduction in immunizations. This may prompt us to look at pre and post -Covid baseline figures in border counties because of its relation to a potential increase in communicable diseases. We must encourage aggressive vaccination campaigns in English and Spanish and working with binational partners. Ms. Hopkins spoke of leveraging the Community Health Worker Training Center and utilize promotores at the grassroots level.

Chair Olivarez asked members to share initiative suggestions. Dr. Chamberlain mentioned air quality as an important topic to discuss. Chair Olivarez agreed and noted working with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ). Dr. Sonne noted future work with TCEQ regarding tire abatement. Chair Olivarez also commented on the importance of Fentanyl and opioids as a public health issue and other members also agreed it was a public health issue to discuss further. Mr. Kotsatos also noted that unused prescription collection sites could be initiated border wide. Dr. Rodriguez also mentioned mental health as a public health topic, especially from a post-Covid perspective.

Dr. Sonne mentioned that all members needed participate to produce recommendations in subcommittees. Because there are currently five subcommittees, there may be a need to add a behavioral health subcommittee, encompassing mental health, opioid use, etc. However, she expressed concerned of stretching too thin, and restructuring the current subcommittees. Chair Olivarez agreed that it was time to restructure the subcommittees. Ms. Hopkins suggested the current Maternal Child Health Subcommittee becoming the Maternal Child Health and Behavioral Health Subcommittee. Dr. Sonne suggested members



concentrate on what the top three priorities will be for the next biennium. Chair Olivarez agreed and reminded members that there are short and long-term recommendations to keep in mind. This led to having a brainstorming/strategic planning exercise for the top three strategic goals in relation to subcommittees. All members agreed and Ms. Kupper mentioned she'd be happy to help organize such a discussion, understanding that it would likely require an in-person meeting. Chair Olivarez thanked members for their input.

Agenda Item VII: Discussion: 2023 Standard Meeting Date Options and subcommittee meetings

Members agreed that the proposed meeting dates below for 2023 were agreeable.

Thursday, February 9, 2023
Wednesday, April 12, 2023
Wednesday, June 7, 2023
Wednesday, August 9, 2023
Wednesday, October 11, 2023
Thursday, December 7, 2023

Members also discussed the possibility of having a strategic planning session during the December 8th Meeting. Chair Olivarez asked if Ms. Kupper can provide a roll call response about attending the December 8th Meeting in-person in Austin. Eight members agreed to meet in-person on December 8, 2023, four members were absent for the roll call response. Members requested that Dr. Banicki be present to provide data regarding different public health topics, including the five, current priorities. Chair Olivarez concluded the discussion by accepting the 2023 meeting dates. Mr. Villarreal reminded members that the December 8th meeting will be an all-day meeting.

Agenda Item VIII: Public comment

Chair Olivarez left the meeting momentarily; Vice Chair Rodriguez asked Ms. Kupper if any public comments were submitted. She confirmed that no public comments were submitted.

Agenda Item IX: Closing remarks, thank you and adjourn

Vice-chair Rodriguez thanked the public, members, and staff for attending the meeting. He advised members to complete their homework and adjourned the meeting 11:36 a.m.