Public Health Funding and Policy Committee Meeting

October 18, 2023

Minutes

Committee Members Attending

Stephen Williams, MEd, MPA - Houston Health Department – Chair

Phillip Huang, MD, MPH – Dallas County Health and Human Services – Vice Chair

Jennifer Griffith, DrPH, MPH – Texas A&M University

Lisa Dick, Brownwood-Brown County Health Department

Sharon Melville, MD, MPH – DSHS, Public Health Region 7

Sharon Whitley – Hardin County Health Department

Attendees:

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| Aelia Akhtar | Jessica R Hyde | Nicole Knight |
| Amanda Ortez | Joanna Seyller | Noah A Chornyak |
| Ann Jacobo | John Villarreal | Rachel E Sonne |
| Angel Anco-Barrera | Katherine Layman | Rafael Alberti |
| Becky Earlie Royer | Kathryn Kaminsky | Ricky Garcia |
| Brenda Narro | Karla Bautista | Robert Kirkpatrick |
| Carlos Plasencia | Karnes Cliffton | Roberto Beaty |
| Carrie Bradford | Lacey Camp | Rocio Rodriguez |
| Christine Riley | Laura LaFuente | Sarah Hollister |
| Cristina Garcia | Lesley Brannan | Saroj Rai |
| Colin Crocker | Lillian Ringsdorf | Molly Fudell |
| Crystal Biggs | Lindsay Lanagan | Scott Milton |
| Dana Birnberg | Lisa Steffek | Sharonica White |
| David Gruber | Lucille Palenapa | Stephen Pont |
| Denise Grogan | Megan Wolfe | Steve Eichner |
| Desmar Walkes | Michael DeLeon | Timothy Patterson |
| Emily Rocha | Mohib Nawab | Tom Valentine |
| Glenna Laughlin | Molly Fudell | Veronica Karam |
| Imelda Garcia | Monica Gamez | Yolanda S Cantu |
| Jennifer Smith | Moriah Hernandez | Walquiria Sanchez |
| Jennifer Shuford | Nicholas Ours |  |

Chair, Mr. Stephen Williams, called the meeting to order at 9:06 am and the committee members introduced themselves.

**August 9th Meeting Minutes**

Lisa Dick motioned to approve the minutes. Phillip Huang seconded. Minutes approved.

**Update on first year of Dr. Jennifer Shuford’s Administration:**

Ms. Imelda Garcia updated the committee on behalf of Dr. Shuford and Kirk Cole with a slide presentation. In Dr. Shuford’s first year as Commissioner, the agency had prioritized Mothers and Babies, data, data use, and strengthening partnerships with local health departments, academia, and other stakeholders. Ms. Imelda Garcia is now Dr. Shuford's senior advisor to help focus on these partnerships but also public health data strategy and modernization. This include the establishment of the Office of Public Health Data Strategy and Modernization, which is led by Monica Gamez, a former Deputy Associate Commissioner within the former laboratory and infectious disease division. Within that office, the NEDSS team is divided into several components.

The first component is the Public Health Laboratory Division, which is led by Dr. Grace Kubin. Dr. Kubin had previously served as the section director, but now the section has been elevated to its own division and reports directly to Dr. Shuford. Dr. Susan Tanksley has assumed the role of Deputy Associate Commissioner for the Public Health Lab Division. The functions of this division remain unchanged in terms of how one works with them.

Josh Hutchinson has been appointed as the new Associate Commissioner for the Infectious Disease Prevention Division. The division, under his leadership, will oversee various programs including immunizations, tuberculosis, HIV, and STD programming. He subsequently took on the responsibility of assisting with the pharmacy and willingly accepted the challenge of leading the HIV, STD, and TB division. His efforts have contributed to improving the division's financial standing and positioning it for future success.

Dr. Varun Shetty has been appointed as the new Chief State Epidemiologist, having previously worked with the CDC. He has taken over the responsibilities of overseeing the emerging and acute infectious disease area, the zoonosis area, and the healthcare safety area. This expanded role will enable the Chief Epidemiologist to have complete oversight of disease investigations and certain essential public health activities.

Dr. Shuford has established the Office of Compliance and Accountability, with Barbara Klein appointed as the officer for this newly formed department. The responsibilities of this role encompass audit coordination, internal policy development, and rulemaking within our agency. Additionally, Ms. Klein will assume the responsibility of managing privacy matters and conducting special investigations. Furthermore, she will oversee fiscal reviews for contracts. It is worth noting that Ms. Klein possesses extensive legal expertise, knowledge, and comprehension in her field.

**Update on COVID-19 Vaccine Administration:**

Mr. Josh Hutchinson updated the committee on COVID-19 vaccine administration with a slide presentation. Over the past month, the COVID-19 vaccine has been allowed to be privatized.

* On September 11, 2023, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a press release stating that Bivalent mRNA COVID-19 vaccines were no longer authorized. The FDA also announced the approval and authorization of updated 2023-2024 COVID-19 vaccines targeting the XBB.1.55 sub-lineage.
* On September 12, 2023, the DCD's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) issued the updated clinical guidance for COVID-19 vaccinations.
* On September 19, 2023, the new COVID-19 2023-2024 formulations were made available in the Vaccine Allocation and Ordering System (VAOS) for all TVFC/ASN providers. These vaccines became the first COVID-19 vaccines to be directly accessible from the manufacturers as part of the commercial market, instead of being obtained through the United States Government by providers not engaged in programs within DSHS.
* On October 3, 2023, the FDA authorized the updated 2023-2024 Novavax COVID-19 vaccine for individuals younger than 12 years, and ACIP updated the clinical guidance in accordance with this.

The COVID-19 vaccines are now accessible through the Texas Vaccines for Children (TVFC) Program, catering to children from birth to 18 years old who fulfill the necessary requirements. Under this program, TVFC providers have the authority to levy an administrative fee of up to $13.75 for administering the COVID-19 vaccine. Nevertheless, these providers are prohibited from refusing the administration of a TVFC vaccine to eligible patients based on their financial constraints, charging an administration fee to Medicaid or CHIP patients, engaging in any debt collection activities, or imposing supplementary fees for non-payment of a TVFC administration fee.

COVID-19 vaccines are now available under the Adult Safety Net (ASN) Program. The program offers the COVID-19 vaccine to individuals aged 19 years and older who do not have insurance or have inadequate insurance coverage. The administration of the COVID-19 vaccine by ASN providers is free of charge, as mandated by federal regulations.

During this fall season, more than 400,000 immunizations have been reported to our ImmTRAC2 registry.

**Update on Current Status regarding Mpox:**

Dr. Varun Shetty updated on the status of Mpox within Texas providing information on its spread, demographics, and other pertinent data. With a track record of monitoring Mpox for over a year in Texas, the previous calendar year demonstrates a consistent decrease in its activity. No new instances or outbreaks were observed during the recent summer, even after the occurrence of large events that had previously triggered outbreaks.

Mr. Hutchinson stated that there were no significant changes to clinical guidelines. He recommended that for patients with severe disease or at high risk for progression to severe disease, tecovirimat should be administered early in the course of the illness along with supportive care and pain control. Additionally, Medical Countermeasures (MCMs) are available for the treatment of Mpox. If there are any consulting questions, individuals are advised to send an email to dshsmpxconsult@dshs.texas.gov.

Patients are encouraged to enroll in the STOMP clinical trial to gather extensive information on the progression of the disease and the impact of the medication on them. After exposure to the Mpox virus, individuals may receive vaccination with JYNNEOS to mitigate the risk of Mpox disease. Those who have been vaccinated should persist in taking precautionary measures to safeguard themselves against infection, such as avoiding close, skin-to-skin contact.

**Update on Public Health Information Systems and Interoperability with Local Health Entities:**

Mr. Steve Eichner presented an update regarding technology and interoperability. On September 1st, the Department of State Health Services declared readiness for electronic case reporting. Interoperability is being promoted by Mr. Eichner, as Medicare providers and hospitals participating in Medicare can now utilize the AIMS platform to report to DSHS. By doing so, they are meeting the federal promoting interoperability requirements that aim to establish minimum necessary standards. The team is also actively collaborating with federal partners to further progress and include additional conditions for case reporting, while simultaneously working alongside hospitals.

Dr. Huang mentioned that there had been discussions regarding Dallas County's potential access to the ImmTrac2 data, like how they currently obtain COVID vaccine data. He believed that having access to information on the immunization rates of children in schools would be advantageous and inquired about the progress. Mr. Stephen Williams asked if there would be an increase in access to data for both the states and locals. Mr. Steve Eichner stated that one of the main goals was to expand the ability to provide partners with access to data, while ensuring compliance with relevant laws. He emphasized the importance of developing effective technology platforms to facilitate this access.

Ms. Glenna Laughlin stated that Dr. Carrie Bradford could be invited to attend the next meeting to provide an update on the Public Health Data Sharing Initiative. Dr. Philip Huang expressed his desire to expand interoperability. He believed that focusing on the local level, where primary data information originates, and building from both the top down and the bottom up could enhance the public health data system. Mr. Stephen Williams suggested inviting a few other local participants actively involved in data exchange to contribute to the discussion on the desired path forward. He also proposed exploring the current system design and considering if there is a more suitable platform to utilize.

Mr. Steve Eichner stated that the key piece is that whatever platform is used needs to meet standards based in interoperability. He emphasized that all the interfaces should utilize the same data messaging standards and interface standards, thus avoiding the need to employ different platforms for different partners.

**Update on Health Disparities Funding:**

Dr. Cristina Garcia presented the community conversations on health program, which runs through May 2024. The grant funds over 50 local and state partners to assist in engaging targeted communities facing health disparities, aiming to better understand their needs and priorities. All contract amendments and updated work plans have been completed to comply with Rider 40. During the summer, interviews were conducted with local health departments to identify their ongoing needs, challenges, and lessons learned from the grant. The feedback is being utilized to support contractors for the remainder of the grant. Local health departments have expressed that the grant has allowed them to conduct crucial assessments of community needs, build rapport, trust among community members, and provide necessary education and outreach to communities experiencing health disparities. The identified overall need is for more resources and assistance in preparing for the end of the grant and planning for the post-grant period.

With the feedback received, shared templates were created to assist contractors in developing sustainability plans and communicating some of their success stories. Additionally, a sharing session was hosted for the contractors, which featured presentations from the Texas Rule funders and the new DSHS Grant Development Center. These presentations provided information on various available grant opportunities, as well as grant writing support and other resources.

The Texas Public Health Fellowship program aims to enhance the public health workforce by offering training opportunities to individuals who are in the early stages of their careers or have an interest in pursuing a career in public health. The program's first cohort, consisting of 29 fellows, successfully completed the program in May. Subsequently, the second cohort, comprising 42 fellows, commenced their fellowship on June 1st. By August 11th, fellows from the initial cohort had begun their graduate school or professional degree programs. Among them, twelve fellows secured permanent positions in public health, with seven joining DSHS, three working in local health departments within Texas, one at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and one with a non-governmental organization. Currently, six fellows are still actively seeking full-time employment. The fellowship team's objective is to maintain communication with all fellows in the upcoming months to gather further updates.

The Office of Practice and Learning conducted surveys and focus groups involving fellows and hosts. The results of these efforts revealed a significant level of satisfaction among both hosts and fellows. Dr. Philip Huang has shown interest in gaining further knowledge about the fellowship program.

Dr. Garcia concluded by sharing some successes of contractors.

**Public Comment:**

Dr. Melville stated that Bastrop County had recently approved the establishment of a local health department for the county.

Dr. Philip Huang stated that there was a Flourishing Families Program, which served as a home visit program for women's maternal and child health after postpartum. He mentioned that it was like Family Connects, but this program might be eligible for Medicaid reimbursement.

Mr. Stephen Williams suggested holding an offline meeting to discuss the criteria and explore whether another state had implemented a pilot program for this initiative.

**Timelines, Next steps, Announcements, and Future Meeting Dates:**

Ms. Glenna Laughlin introduced Mr. Michael Comfort as the new Staff Liaison to the Public Health Funding and Policy Committee. The next meeting would be on December 13, 2023. She would coordinate subject matter experts to give an update on data modernization at the next meeting. Dr. Shuford would also be present at the next meeting to discuss her strategic plan and vision for the agency. The annual report was complete, and the response report is being finalized. DSHS will brief the committee on those updates at the December meeting.

**Adjourn:**

Dr. Philip Huang made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Dr. Jennifer Griffith seconded the motion. The motion carried and the meeting was adjourned.

Approved:

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Stephen L. Williams, Committee Chair Date