



# PRINCETON BOARD OF HEALTH

Monthly Meeting Minutes

**March 8, 2022**

Zoom Meeting \* Princeton, NJ 08540

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## **Board Members – Present**

George DiFerdinando, Jr. MD, MPH

Meredith Hodach–Avalos, MD

JoAnn Hill, RN

Kathleen Stillo, MBA, (Alt. 1)

Katherine Taylor, JD, PhD (Alt. 2)

Leticia Fraga, Council Liaison

Linda Schwimmer, JD

Mona Shah, PhD

Rick Strauss, MD

Rick Weiss, MS

## **Staff**

Jeffrey Grosser, MHS, HO, REHS

## **Guest Speaker**

Mark Freda, Mayor of Princeton

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Chair, Dr. George DiFerdinando, called the Regular meeting to order at 7:30 p.m. He recited the announcement in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act: *“This is to affirm that the regularly scheduled meeting of the Princeton Board of Health has been duly advertised and is being conducted in compliance with all provision of the New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act.”*

Roll Call was completed.

## **Public Comment/Guest Speaker:**

Chair DiFerdinando went over the protocol for public comments. No comments were initially made. Public comments were postponed until the legalization of recreational cannabis topic was addressed.

## **Minutes:**

Chair DiFerdinando addressed the minutes from the February 8, 2022 BOH Regular Meeting. After review, no proposed changes were made to the minutes. Ms. JoAnn Hill motioned to approve the minutes, seconded by Vice-chair Meredith Hoch-Avalos. Chair DiFerdinando approved the minutes without any changes.

## **Monthly Report:**

Princeton Health Officer Jeffrey Grosser gave a report on the current status of COVID-19 in Princeton and the recent update to the mask mandate. Much of the health department’s efforts for the month of February involved the updated K-12 school guidance which was released by the Department of Health, along with the buildup of the lifting of the state mask mandate for schools by Governor Phil Murphy, on March 7, 2022. The health department has been working closely with local school systems and private schools on best procedures as to when the lifting of the mask mandate will take place. The majority of February was used for working through that guidance, and then newest K-12 guidance came out at the end of February

COVID-19 cases continue to decrease to levels not seen since November 2020. The Health Officer is working with Princeton schools on determining their mask protocols since Governor Murphy’s school mask mandate ended on March 7. PHD is utilizing NJ regional case transmission data along with information from Harvard’s report on associated mitigation interventions in schools and vaccine coverage across local incidence levels report:

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2789005>

In looking at the New Jersey COVID Activity Level Index (CALI) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) community transmission and associated mask-wearing metric, the Princeton area is in the low to



low-moderate index at this point. The local school district and several private schools have opted to proceed with optional masking as of the Governor's announcement yesterday. Mr. Grosser added that although mask wearing is now going to be optional, schools will still need to maintain their preparedness and evaluate universal masking in the event of an outbreak during periods of elevated community transmission, and for students and staff returning from quarantine or isolation. PHD will continue to work with schools on contact tracing but wants to make sure they keep those systems in place to be successful when they have those scenarios.

The PHD staff and animal control officer organized a free rabies clinic on 3/5/22 from 10am-12pm at the Princeton Fire Department. Fifty-two dogs and cats were vaccinated.

Regarding the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) that the PHD, Human Services and Affordable Housing departments were awarded, the vulnerable population outreach coordinator (VPOC) and COVID-19 Generalist (CVG) have finalized the first portion, which involves acquiring \$30k worth of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for vulnerable populations, as well as for low and moderate income households in Princeton. Population care packages are being put together which will assist individuals if they are quarantined or isolated, and will include household items like trash bags and toothbrushes as well as COVID-19 test kits.

It is anticipated that mayor and council will review the resolution authorizing this purchase by the end of March, and after their approval, the goal is to put this into distribution by the end of April at the latest. This effort is in line with the Mercer County Public Health Partnership Community Health Improvement Plan which has a COVID-19 recovery strategic priority.

Also with the CDBG, the VPOC and CVG are putting together a professional services arrangement for local dental and vision practices to assist low and moderate income households with free vision and dental care.

The VPOC and CVG have begun planning art classes for the Mayor's Wellness Campaign (MWC). These classes are designed to assist with lowering social isolation, which can lead to loneliness and have serious long-term health effects. Now that all supplies have been received kits will be distributed. Four classes, two in person and two online, will be hosted from February to April. The MWC Isolation project is confirming dates for the art classes with the Art's Council. Once confirmed these classes will begin, both online and in-person, during the last week of February.

Lastly, PHD continues to offer vaccinations and boosters in the community. Clinics held over the last four weeks occurred at La Mexicana, the Princeton Public School Administration Building, Princeton Senior Resource Center and the Hun School of Princeton. Overall, the demand for COVID-19 vaccine and booster shots has been waning, but the health department found that where the vaccination clinics were performed with specific organizations (the local district and private schools), there is a much higher vaccine uptake in terms of the scheduling and organization.

Ms. Monah Shah congratulated Mr. Grosser and the whole PHD team on the outreach and success of vaccination rates in the community. Mr. Grosser also extended gratitude to the nurses, CVG and VPOC for their efforts.

### **Reports from Committees**



Ms. Schwimmer thanked Vice-chair Hoch-Avalos and Kathleen Taylor for volunteering to be on the Strategic Planning Committee with her. She will reach out to other board members by the end of the week to see which other work groups or committees they want to be on. So far, she recommends keeping the liaison work the same way it has been due to lack of responses wanting to change it. She went over the current committees that were agreed on at the last meeting: Emergency Preparedness, Equity, and Strategic Planning. Further Liaison Groups/Appointments are: Vision Zero Network, Human Services, Civil Rights Committee, Office of Emergency Preparedness, Environmental Commissions, PAAD, and PSRC.

Ms. Hill volunteered to be on the Emergency Preparedness group. Ms. Shah volunteered to be on the Equity Committee, and Mr. Rick Weiss stated he will continue with Vision Zero.

Ms. Schwimmer expressed appreciation to all who volunteered.

### **Reports from other Boards/Commissions/Task Forces**

No discussion was held.

### **Work Session**

No discussion was held, this was postponed until the next BOH meeting in April.

### **New Business**

Health Officer Grosser gave a Health Department Annual Report Overview. The 2020 Annual Report focused a lot on case investigations and contact tracing, whereas the 2021 Annual Report looked a lot at vaccination clinics, community outreach, and specifically, PHD's own staff working tirelessly through the year to ensure equitable vaccine access and that other necessary public health services were still done. He then displayed highlights from his condensed overall annual report as slides on a shared screen for all to view.

Throughout 2021, PHD continued to look at numbers behind COVID-19, examining social demographic information and closely monitoring localized transmission and case clusters. From a high-level overview, 950 cases of COVID-19 were investigated in 2021 in Princeton, with an average age of 35-years-old, compared to an average age of 42-years-old in 2020. The difference in age, although not substantial, likely has to do with the impact in 2020 in nursing homes and improvements made there for infectious disease prevention into 2021. Also, with the decrease in capacity restrictions and other public health measures, an uptick of positive COVID-19 cases was noted in the local younger population

In December 2021, PHD's data took a significant shift with the sudden spike of OMICRON variant cases in Princeton, with the weeks leading up to the holidays and end of the year reaching up to 60 cases per day. Similar to 2020, the health department continued to observe a disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on populations in Princeton, specifically on Princeton's African-American and Hispanic/Latino population. This data continued to influence PHD's outreach events, including putting COVID-19 vaccine clinics in neighborhoods that were seeing the highest number of COVID-19 cases from 2020 and 2021.

The Health Department saw success with its vaccination rates in the state, and Mr. Grosser thanked the residents and staff for the impressive vaccination rates in town. He noted that the first vaccination clinic was held January 13, 2021 and in total, the PHD conducted 57 vaccination clinics, with 4,361 doses



administered. He then expressed gratitude for the instrumental hard work done by staff in the department, particularly by four staff who had made tremendous impacts in the community and with their outreach. He focused on the efforts and success of those staff, the public health nurses, CVG, and VPOC. Chair DiFerdinando also expressed gratitude for the public health nurses hard work.

Ms. Hill and Councilwoman Leticia Fraga thanked Mr. Grosser for his summary, and Vice-chair Hoch-Avalos commented on how much more was done once vulnerable population groups were identified and resources were gotten out to them.

### **Old Business:**

Chair DiFerdinando spoke on the topic of Public Meeting Status. He noted the difference in COVID-19 rates and the State CALI score since the BOH meeting last month. The current low transmission rate will likely allow for in-person meetings, though social distancing will still need to be maintained, along with other health measures. Extra-large meetings may require masking, though the logistics of this will need further discussion. Princeton Mayor Mark Freda commented that the sooner we can get back to resuming meetings in-person (with safe guards in place), it is a good thing. Hybrid meetings will likely be more beneficial than just in-person, as it would also allow for people with limited access or availability to still attend. Councilwoman Fraga further discussed the possibility of hybrid meetings. Chair DiFerdinando offered to come up with a draft for resuming meetings in hybrid form, and share it in the next two weeks with Mayor Freda and Councilwoman Fraga for their feedback on this work product.

Chair DiFerdinando began the discussion, entitled under Health Impacts of Recreational Cannabis Legalization (RCL). At the previous meeting, there was a presentation on the health impacts of cannabis in general, not just recreational cannabis. At that time, there was a request that the board consider the health implications of cannabis use and legalization. An ad hoc committee was formed with Chair DiFerdinando, Vice-chair Hoch-Avalos and Mr. Strauss. The ad hoc committee came up with two work products: a backgrounder on the health impacts of cannabis and draft resolution on what this subcommittee would recommend prior to the establishment of recreational cannabis sale in Princeton.

Vice-chair Hoch-Avalos spoke to the content of the backgrounder report and draft resolution, and she summarized key points and the need for ongoing study for a lot of issues, along with explaining the need for a harm-reduction model for commercial retail sale, and treatment options to outweigh any harm from cannabis use. Mr. Strauss further commented, adding that the key message is to be prepared and have public health education programs available prior to sale, that the council should provide for adequate resources and training before local sales, and periodically monitor effects. He also stated the need to place context around the CTF report, which is what the Backgrounder did, and that Resolution calls for reasonable public health measures as done in other states that have legalized cannabis.

Ms. Taylor thanked the subcommittee for their research and time, and stressed the importance of educating the public first. Other board members weighed in on the topic of education, safety and legalization.

Ms. Kathleen Stilo added that she emailed each Board member individually to share her concerns about the resolution drafted, which goes way beyond our mandate as a Board of Health. Cannabis for recreational use is a done-deal in NJ since it was approved by 78% of Princetonians. Home delivery will be statewide, including in Princeton, very soon. Our role is to generate educational materials which take a harm reduction approach to recreational cannabis use. Since there is no consensus on the Board



regarding the proposed resolution, we should bring this to a referendum so the people of Princeton can let their voices be heard specifically on the issue of retail sale in Princeton.

**Public Comments/Guest Speaker:**

**[Health Impacts of Recreational Cannabis Legalization (RCL)]**

Chair DiFerdinando shared the screen and read the BOH Public Comment and Questions Protocol, before opening the floor for public comment.

Community member Gabriel Saltarelli thanked the BOH for their work on this issue, and spoke about a recent study of the impact of recreational dispensaries on traffic safety. He stated that the research looked at fatal car crash data, which showed increased accidents and car deaths where cannabis retail opened, relative to zip codes without dispensaries. He recommended the BOH advise against allowing cannabis dispensaries in town.

Community member David Nathan stated his formal background and commented on RCL. He spoke about his disappointment with the CTF report, and that some peer review studies show opioid use and misuse and fatal overdoses may actually decrease with RCL. He further expounded on this topic and stressed the need to not bend to RCL prohibitionists.

Community member Lisa Jacknow shared her support for the BOH resolution, and stated that the BOH must focus on public health concerns.

Community member Abigail Kalmbach thanked the BOH for their time and consideration invested working on the Backgrounder. She then stated her formal background and expressed disagreement in the BOH postponing RCL. She further added that she agrees having educational material is needed, and recreational cannabis sales should be approved, and then commented on prevention of minors gaining access to cannabis, mail delivery of cannabis, and how cannabis sales tax should be used.

Community member Tom Pyle thanked the BOH and showed his appreciation for different conversations on this issue. He then stated his formal background and spoke on RCL and mental illness, in addition to his concerns on why cannabis was voted into legalization, conflicts of interest, RCL detrimental impact on youths' IQs, and the negative effects of RCL on the mentally ill and otherwise vulnerable people. He urged the BOH to take all of this into account and have a slower adoption and consideration of the legalization cannabis.

Community member Valeria Torres-Olivares commented on the dialogue on RCL, in that to her it seems fear-based and bias. She further commented on underage usage of cannabis and opening dispensaries in Princeton.

Community member Sheila Geoghegan thanked the BOH for their Backgrounder and proposed Resolution. She then spoke about the BOH's role in being stewards of public health, and whether to open cannabis retail in town. She further spoke about vaping issues in town such as selling vapes to minors, and social justice issues in relation to RCL.

Community member Emanuele Gillio spoke about risk over benefit in relation to RCL, and that the risks to him seem to be more significant than what the benefits are, if any.



Community member Mikaylah, introduced herself and spoke in favor of RCL. She also commented that vaping issues of sales to minors are not comparable to cannabis dispensaries, since the latter has a higher level of security and scrutiny, as opposed to the local convenience store that may sell vapes.

Community member Matthew Bellace gave his formal background and addressed issues on RCL in relation to social media being used by dispensaries and the cannabis industry as a whole, for advertising to youth. He stressed why cannabis should not be sold in town, and negative effects cannabis use has on the brain.

Community member Rita B. spoke about slowing down RCL, and showed appreciation for other's comments. She added her personal perspective and thanked the BOH.

Community member John Heilner expressed his appreciation for the BOH's efforts. He then showed his support for RCL, and shared his personal view on using legalized cannabis for medical relief, the importance of getting to know the local dispensary staff, and peace of mind knowing that high quality cannabis is being provided by dispensaries without contaminants. He highlighted that the majority of voters in Princeton were in favor of RCL, and expounded on why it should be legalized.

Community member Dr. Phyllis Teitelbaum state her formal background and expressed support for legalizing recreational cannabis. She added that cannabis should be regulated the same way as alcohol, and dispensaries should be treated like liquor stores.

Community member Dr. Gary Maltz commented on the BOH's Backgrounder document and draft resolution, and expressed what he found to be deficiencies and areas where further details are needed. He commented on the lack of data, references and citations, as well as educational materials and the effects of RCL on youth. He further added that he does not support deferring RCL at this time and wants the board members to consider his full comment.

Chair DiFerdinando commented that after hearing the various skilled experts disagreeing on RCL, he feels more time is needed. Data is not yet generated, and not enough is known yet. State by state, different methods are being used and it is not yet known what the impacts of RCL will be. He elaborated on this point. Mr. Strauss added that local dispensaries are distracting from other health issues. Ms. Hill expressed her appreciation for all of the public comments, and stated that the work product should be sent back to council for reconsideration, adding that she does not feel Princeton is ready yet for RCL. Other board members weighed in on Ms. Hill's proposition. After review, Mr. Strauss moved on Ms. Hill's motion to respect the process and allow council to see a Draft guidance prior to the Board vote, as well as to incorporate any additional feedback from committee members. It was unanimously approved and will be sent back to the committee.

### **Adjournment**

The motion to adjourn at 9:33 p.m. was moved by Vice-chair Hoch-Avalos, seconded by Mr. Strauss, and affirmatively carried by all those present.

Respectfully submitted by:



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*Paula Alexeev*  
Recording Secretary  
Princeton Board of Health