

HAMILTON BOARD OF HEALTH

MINUTES OF MEETING

DECEMBER 10, 2020

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Members Present: David Smith (Chair), Christopher Small, Giselle Perez

Others Present: Rachel Lee (Public Health Nurse) and Leslie Whelan (Health Agent)

This meeting was called to order at 5:00p.m. by David Smith. All but Rachel Lee and Dr. Perez were initially in attendance via Zoom and since there was a quorum the meeting proceeded.

Review and approve Meeting Minutes of November 24, 2020

Motion made by David Smith to approve the minutes of the meeting of November 24, 2020.

Seconded by Christopher Small.

Roll Call Vote: Christopher Small – aye and David Smith – aye.

Minutes approved.

Update/Discussion from Board on Covid-19 DPH conference calls and related matters including ongoing Public Health Education Campaign

David Smith reported that the twice weekly conference calls with the Commissioner of the Department of Public Health cover a wide range of topics. Most are probably aware through the public media of the subjects that have been covered, decisions made, announcements made, etc. Among the most significant, the governor has elected to go more restrictive on what freedoms we enjoy and recently, under this Covid-19 situation, a lot of businesses have become subject to more restrictive numbers of customers who may be present, etc.

Most importantly, our Public Health Nurse, Rachel Lee has done a great job of bringing more Covid-19 testing availability to our residents. She has worked with our Town Manager to make testing capabilities available. The location for testing of Hamilton and Wenham residents is at the Public Safety Facilities next to the Police and Fire Headquarters.

Things are changing constantly and everyone's attention is focused on vaccines, specifically the Pfizer vaccine and when will it become available. Initial 60,000 will most likely be allocated to nursing home patients and staff and beyond that should go to health care workers with this or the next round of doses.

Report from Public Health Nurse, Rachel Lee

Yesterday was the first Covid testing day at the Miles River Middle School and there were about 146 people tested and test results are coming in already with 3 positives so far and 2 of the 3

were already quarantined. Broad Institute has been phenomenal with how quickly they get the information back.

With the 3 extra positives, that brings the current positive number to 10 right now. There is 1 positive in the list that is actually in Florida so that will be switched over to Florida. Positive numbers will likely increase as the test results come in. It is an important tool to reduce the risk as well as other Covid-safe behaviors such as not getting together in large groups for the holidays and wearing a mask and staying 6 feet apart – that's the first line of defense. However, testing is there for after the exposure has happened. The question of testing availability for everyone has come up so that residents can visit family but having a negative test for one day is not enough to protect your family because the next day you could be positive because it takes a little while to get the viral load up.

The website has been updated, Pat Shannon has been putting up information that Rachel has asked him to and Rachel has been getting information from the Department of Health website. A new information link for how the vaccine is going to be distributed has been added as well. It is important to stay the course until the vaccines come out.

Right now, it is most important to educate people and help people's emotions as it is so hard for everyone, stress is everywhere. Being a nurse is about taking care of patients, of their mind, body, and spirit. Rachel is trying to bring that nursing care to the Town of Hamilton right now during a really tough time.

Rachel is looking to encourage Covid-safe behavior such as working with Chief Stevens on an idea that Michelle Brailford, who is a contact tracer had given to encourage wearing masks and practicing safe behaviors for middle schoolers and high schoolers. Officer Kent Stevens, the school resource officer is going to be talking with the school about handing out coupons for community service when he sees students at popular hangouts like Patton Park practicing Covid-safe behaviors such as social distancing and wearing a mask.

The idea Rachel had to encourage Covid-safe behaviors for the adults is to ask Chief Stevens if officers could hand out \$2 Crosby gift cards that she purchased when they observe Covid-safe behaviors in adults, such as wearing a mask, as a thank you from the Hamilton Board of Health.

Rachel would like to have a zoom meeting with different groups who have been reported as being scared or have a lot of questions such as the teachers, seniors, and possibly one for parents with school-age children.

Another idea Rachel had, is to have a contest where people from all different age groups in town could create some kind of artwork about Covid-safe behaviors and how the pandemic experience has been for them. The artwork could then be put up on the website and viewed by the community and then voted on. This could be a good coping mechanism because mental health is also part of public health.

Rachel has found 2 people to help with contact tracing whose references are being checked. Rachel has also been in contact with Leah Tabenkin and has asked her to speak with Beauport Ambulance Service about having a program in place in the schools for testing when the nurses feel it needs to happen which will help to keep the schools open. The Town Manager of Hamilton and the Town Administrator of Wenham are on board and are working together to get the funding for testing to happen in the schools as well as community-wide testing after December 31, 2020 to replace the Cares Act. Rachel feels that people are coming together and working together and feels that they are on the right track.

David Smith thanked Rachel Lee for all of her efforts and ideas even though some truculent residents have made it difficult.

Rachel also explained that there are 2 people who need meals delivered. There is a congregation where church members asked if they could do a meal train for people who are in need during the pandemic. These church members agreed to deliver the meals to Rachel in order to maintain their confidentiality, and she will deliver the meals to them.

Leslie Whelan asked Rachel Lee if she is performing the Covid testing and Rachel explained that Beauport is doing the testing in full PPE and tests are being done outdoors. When vaccines come out, they will be done at an alternate site at the Public Safety Building so they can drive through at the fire bay. Rachel has spoken to the Fire Chief, Raymond Brunet and everyone will be wearing masks so there will not be an increased risk to any of the fire fighters or the police officers.

Dr. Perez emphasized that the emotional piece of public health and the behavioral intervention reinforcement that Rachel identified are great although there is a limitation. The challenge that is being encountered is the lack of trust that exists in the community and has become increasingly polarizing. The Board really needs to increase the level of transparency and communication that is happening across the community. The more that people don't know the more that people will create in their minds and fuel anxiety which is what is creating the behaviors that are being seen right now. What is needed is to unite and insure that the Board is being consistent in their communication and are transparent and allowing opportunities for citizens to communicate their distress versus going behind and doing their own communication and coming up with their own solutions versus working together.

Update on Recent Meetings of the HWRSD Covid Response Team

David Smith tuned into the School Committee meeting on 12/9/20 and to the concerns that residents expressed specifically about the decision-making process of the Covid Response Team and the lack of transparency in the decision making of that body. This agenda item will cover 2 parts, the obvious lack of transparency of the decision making and the basis for the decision making.

Starting with the lack of transparency, David recalls back in the beginning the School Committee decided to empower the Superintendent to form a Covid Response Team outside of

the public eye to allow the Superintendent to make decisions based on guidance from the Board of Health, etc., and because it was a body created by the Superintendent outside of public meeting laws, that organization could meet and make decisions in private which led to a lack of confidence in the decisions that were made. This situation needs to be corrected and decisions on learning mode need to be more transparent to the public.

A few suggestions:

David Smith recommended adding a parent to the Covid Response Team so that person would be able to communicate with the public or make the meetings open. There are a number of ways in which this could be done. The way things are being done at the moment is fostering discontent, discomfort, and aggravation on the part of parents of school children.

Dr. Perez shared that if parents are included, there should be one that is pro-remote and one that is pro-full inhouse so there will be diverging viewpoints. The bigger issue is that people don't cope well with uncertainty. Things are shifting so rapidly without any preparation, people are left thinking they thought they knew even though nothing is certain and then leads to again, that output of behavior. Part of it is that what has been happening has not seemed to be like an emergency and yet has led to an emergency response and that is why people are having difficulty responding to that discrepancy. There is so much more that is known now that movement with some prediction should be possible. There is information in terms of spread within schools or lack thereof, more in elementary schools. More preparation is needed weeks in advance in terms of staffing for example, because it is not something that is an emergency.

Christopher Small, a retired teacher, explained that it must be very difficult being a teacher in the public school system and it is understandable why some teachers are retiring and many teachers are frightened and very worried about getting Covid-19 in many cases because of their age, and also because of the situation they are in. In terms of the public, something substantial needs to be done right now and the idea of putting a parent or two on the Covid Response Team is a good idea. It provides almost immediate transparency. Parents need to know that there is a parent or two on that team and how they share information after those meetings is really up to them but it opens the door and allows them to be folded into the process and it will no longer be completely behind closed doors with a handpicked group of people.

Rachel Lee explained that she and one other parent are on this advisory committee, Rachel herself being a parent of 2 school aged children, and they are having a hard time when they are remote. Mary Beth Ting is also a Public Health Nurse, a School Nurse and has 3 or 4 children who are in the school so they are invested in more than one way. David added that bringing parents in who do not have any other role should make a difference.

For the Covid Response Team of the Superintendent meeting tomorrow morning, David Smith would like to propose that the Board of Health feels it is imperative that the Superintendent add 2 parents of children in the school system to the Covid Response Team and that she select those two parents at her discretion and her peril to represent the parents of school children.

Motion made by David Smith to approve the recommendation to the Superintendent that she include 2 parents of school children in the school system.

Seconded by Dr. Perez.

Discussion:

Dr. Perez would encourage that it is not selected by the Superintendent but rather people have the option to put their names in given the way things have transpired over the past couple of months, if a selection is made it is going to be perceived as biased.

Christopher Small explained that if people volunteered and 2 people were chosen, it would be seen as about as transparent as it can be.

David Smith explained that there is another alternative, rather than enlarging the membership of the Covid Response Team, require that the Team deliberations be made public by putting them up on a public zoom meeting.

Rachel Lee proposed that the representatives for the parents should be people who have an ear to the ground as far as what the parents are thinking. Perhaps the Friends of the various schools help to select and figure out who are 2 representatives of the parents at large could then be part of this because they are more connected with the rest of the parents and they would be able to bring the thoughts of the parents at large to the deliberation process. Rachel felt that an open zoom meeting about cases in quarantine and who is at what school, would not allow confidentiality.

David Smith proposed to amend the motion with 2 additions to it:

1. The school parent groups nominate individuals to the Superintendent for membership on the Covid Response Team.
2. The Covid Response Team figure out how to reconcile the conflicts between the HIPAA regulations and the need for public health imperatives in this pandemic.

Roll Call Vote: David Smith – aye, Christopher Small – aye, Giselle Perez – aye
Unanimous in favor.

Discussion and vote on draft revised Metrics for HWRSD

David Smith reported that during July, August and September at the request of the Superintendent, the Hamilton and Wenham Boards of Health developed and revised, several times, metrics to serve as guidance for the Superintendent deciding on learning mode for the schools. The metrics development process was started back in July without the benefit of medical or scientific guidance. This has been a virus that has confounded the experts, proved experts wrong, proved some predictions right – a lot of predictions wrong.

The most important finding for purposes of guidance or learning mode in this Hamilton-Wenham school district is that outbreaks of infections in schools are rare even when community transmission is increasing. Based on all of the experience during the current school

semester and careful consideration of all the data that is available now as opposed to then, David is proposing that the data information that should be reviewed to make recommendations to the Superintendent on school learning mode follows about a dozen different items. It includes some items that have been considered until now, on which there has been zero data up until the last couple of months with students in school. It includes the latest medical and scientific research on the subject.

The use of a simple red, yellow, green light would be useful however it is not that simple. Now there is the benefit of much more information, research and medical facts – the Board is in a better position today than they were back in March and April when they were in a purely reactive mode. David explained that with a lot of medical, scientific, epidemiological and social information to work with, there is a Covid Response Team with experienced and for some part, professionals with relevant experience to work with on the data to make a decision. David would like to give the Covid Response Team the benefit of the doubt and the ability to make an informed judgement on all of the information that is available and not just the data at a moment in time but the trends. Where are the trends going? Then make a recommendation to the Superintendent based on that information. The updated and revised guidance that David has proposed that the Board adopt is founded on that premise. Included in this recommendation is a document from the Harvard Global Health Network from a couple of days ago and is an important piece of the facts on the basis that a decision be made.

Dr. Perez is concerned that it is perceived that the Board of Health has a role in the decisions that are being made with regard to the opening and closing of schools. It is important to note that things have changed and the transmission in elementary and middle schools are rare to non-existent when mitigation strategies are being used. The high schools are a bit more questionable though people interpret it their own way.

David Smith has read hundreds of emails calling into question the basis on which the Superintendent has decided to do X or Y or Z with the schools on the basis of the Covid Response Teams recommendations which is based on what the Hamilton and Wenham Boards of Health have provided to the Superintendent upon her request. The public perception is that David, Dr. Perez and Christopher and Wenham counterparts have dictated a decision by the Superintendent notwithstanding the fact that that is not true.

There is an obligation to the constituents and to the public to try to offer the best advice and guidance there is. This Covid-19 virus has defied so many experts and the Board is constantly learning and trying to offer the best advice to the schools and the parents of the children who attend those schools. At the beginning there was no choice but to propose the best that could be found in the way of guidance and advice. People gravitate to an easier explanation because it is simple and easy to grasp. The situation is much more complicated and nuanced than that and accounting for all of what is now known should be incorporated into advice and guidance to the Superintendent. It is not a mandate, just guidance and advice to give her a basis for making a decision.

In the first week of November, Public Health Nurse Christine Lee resigned and she is gone. The Covid Response Team was absolutely devoid of any representation of the Town of Hamilton. David Small became a substitute in the meetings representing Hamilton since then. Rachel Lee is now on the team to replace Christine and David will continue to participate. What David has learned in the past month on this team and considering all what has happened to the understanding of Covid-19 and its epidemiology, the sociology since then, the constituents need to give this Covid Response Team the ability to take into consideration all of the relevant information and make the best decision they can.

The Board went to great pains to work with counterparts in Wenham to come to joint board meetings to deal with this request from the Superintendent to give guidance and they did. What is different now? David Smith has decided the model of the United States Congress applies here. In the Congress the House of Representatives comes up with a proposed piece of legislation on a subject, the Senate comes up with a piece of legislation on that subject and they are different. They vote on them and say here is our bill, here is our bill and they are different. What happens? The 2 bodies get together and they form a working committee and they come up with a compromise and the 2 bodies then vote on that compromise and it's done. That's the new law. That is the model that David is proposing.

David Smith proposed that the Board vote on the subject to all of the revisions and then present it to the Superintendent and the Wenham Board compatriots at the same time and explain that this is what has been done, you decide what you would like to do and then a compromise will be made and perhaps get together for a joint board meeting and vote on a unified set of recommendations to the Superintendent.

Dr. Perez thinks the document is clear and questions whether the Board needs to go through this again, is this necessary at this stage? David Smith feels it is necessary at this time.

Rachel Lee thinks there needs to be something to replace the one that is out there already that talks about this number or this percentage should trigger a certain action. This is to instead say it's more nuanced, all of these things need to be looked at when the time comes.

David Smith explained to Dr. Perez that there have been many emails and other means of communication in the past week or two, "why did you decide this when your metrics required that? They are not consistent, what is going on here?"

Dr. Perez agreed that a revision is needed so that it is left even more open so there can be more flexibility and not feel anchored to a metric that in and of itself says you are not anchored to this.

Christopher Small explained that when Board Members have met with their Wenham counterparts, the last paragraph that talks about, there will be no definite thresholds or specific numerical metrics to trigger a decision one way or another, needs to be front and center.

Motion made by David Smith who proposed that the Hamilton Board of Health approve the updated and revised Covid-19 guidance for the Hamilton-Wenham Regional School District Superintendent a draft dated December 7, 2020 amended as our Board Member, Christopher Small has proposed and David Smith will take the responsibility implement.

Seconded by Christopher Small.

Roll Call Vote: Christopher Small – aye, David Smith – aye, Dr. Perez – aye
Unanimous in favor.

Dr. Perez explained that in terms of feedback to the Covid Response Team the idea of, is there a way to communicate this aspect of the decision-making process and the rapid shifts being made? Is there a way to help the emotional distress piece? This is contributing to elevating the emotional distress in the community.

The DESE DPH recommendation a month ago to wait for several week's worth of 2-week averages of data before you make a change is to avoid the instantaneous toggling back and forth and driving parents crazy which exacts a greater emotional toll than anything having to do with the pandemic.

Dr. Perez agreed and explained that one aspect might have higher risk than another and it would behoove the group to think about what is being looked at over the next couple of weeks and what might be some of the challenges, so that way it is anticipated that if there is a toggle, then at least anticipating it and being proactive vs. waiting.

David Smith will communicate the sense of the Board of Health at the Covid Response Team in the morning.

Report from Health Agent, Leslie Whelan

Leslie explained that the annual permit renewals work is continuing. In a few more weeks they will all be cycled through and sent out.

Leslie told the group that there is an opportunity to receive reimbursement of \$1,400 for flu clinics so she is working with the Finance people in town to get that documentation so they can be reimbursed.

This week an opportunity for \$4,000 from a similar funding stream, ultimately the Department of Public Health, that can be used for Covid response.

Leslie has also been working on administrative things like helping Rachel with her new phone and voicemail and putting her in touch with some groups who are able to help her.

Leslie looked at the Get Back Mass video and she did send a link to the social media person and asked that one of those be pushed out to social media.

David Smith replied that that public health campaign continues and the Board has been pushing out several times a week, new items that have gotten interest from the community. One of which is the Covid testing capability that has been made available through the town. Another is issues reported by the residents with local food establishments, restaurants that have come up as a concern. The Food Inspector, Bobby Cody has dealt well with those incidents.

Rachel Lee explained that everyone is dealing with a very stressful situation. Everyone is doing the best they can to get the right information out there and to make what resources there are go toward the things that are going to help protect the community. Relaying information about where to get tested, even if the once a week or twice a week test site cannot take you, sharing that there are a lot more places to get tested now.

David Smith said that the next issue that is going to become the focus of public attention is who gets the vaccine when.

Rachel Lee said that vaccine information was posted on Mass.gov and Patrick Shannon put it up on the website as well so there is a graphic that shows the group of people who are going to get the first round and then the second round. Rachel believes that the second round is going to include teachers and retail workers and the people who are really out there in the public. The important thing is once the first people start getting vaccinated, the healthcare workers who are taking care of Covid patients who are in the ER, the ICU's – once these people get vaccinated, that is going to help prevent them from passing it along inadvertently in a healthcare setting. Then as they get to the nursing homes and taking care of the residents and the staff, nursing homes and long-term care facilities are where there have been the most issues with clusters of infection and also where the most vulnerable people are. Once those initial people are vaccinated, the deaths and the severe disease will start to be reduced rather quickly. Then as more people get vaccinated, the numbers will come down.

David Smith expressed to the Board how relieved and thrilled he is that Rachel Lee has agreed to take on the role of Public Nurse for Hamilton. David has worked with Rachel for the past month and told the Board that she is exceeding all of his expectations and thanked her for her help.

Schedule date and topics for the next Board Meeting

The Board agreed that barring any extraordinary circumstances, the Board will meet at 5 p.m. on January 7, 2021.

Dr. Perez added that when they are at the point of vaccination, it would be great to communicate to the public the aspect of the vaccine and how it came to be because there may be public concerns.

Rachel Lee explained that the Hamilton website already has a link from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health that has information about the vaccine and they have already said they will be revealing all of the data from the vaccines before they allow them to start being

distributed. It will not be just FDA approval, it will also be people involved with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

Dr. Perez said that when it comes to that time, it would be good to simplify the information and be able to answer any questions people may have and this is where Rachel Lee's expertise will be helpful.

David Smith explained that public acceptance of the safety of the vaccine is a whole other topic that should be put on the agenda for the next meeting, the status of public acceptance of vaccination against Covid-19. David said that the latest poll that he saw said that two-thirds of people said they would happily take the vaccine and one-third said, no they would not.

Adjournment

Motion made by Christopher Small to adjourn at 6:36 p.m.

Seconded by Dr. Perez

Roll Call Vote: David Smith – aye, Christopher Small – aye, Giselle Perez – aye

Prepared by:

Ann Schlecht	Attest	Date
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