

Newburyport Board of Health Meeting
December 3, 2020

Date of Approval: 12/17/2020

Attendees

Dr. Robin Blair, Chairman
Dr. Sam Merabi, Board Member
Dr. Robert Slocum, Board Member
Frank Giacalone, Health Director
Patricia McAlarney, Note Taker

Call to Order: called meeting called to order at 7:13 p.m.

Approval of Minutes: Motion to approve the Minutes of the Board of Health Meeting from November 12, 2020 was made by Dr. Slocum and seconded by Dr. Merabi. Votes to approve - 3; votes to oppose - 0. Minutes were approved as submitted.

COVID-19 DISCUSSION - Director Giacalone informed the Board that over the past few weeks there has been a tremendous increase in confirmed positive COVID cases and an increase in the number of probable cases, as well. Cases that tested positive using a PCR Test are categorized as "confirmed" and may be forwarded to the State Community Tracing Collaborative (CTC) for monitoring and contact tracing. Cases that test positive via antigen testing are classified as "probable"; these cases are not currently allowed to be sent to the CTC to be followed and traced and are, therefore, handled by the Health Department. Due to the increase in workload, the department has hired three part-time Contact Tracers. One Tracer has been hired to work on nights and weekends to serve as Liaison with the public schools to reach out to faculty or the families' of students to issue guidance for isolation or quarantine when a positive test or COVID exposure has occurred. Often times student's parents provide notification before the test results have appeared in the MAVEN system. Prior to hiring the School Liaison it was the school nurses that provided all of the initial guidance to parents to ensure that infected or potentially infective cases do not attend school until they are cleared to do so by the Board of Health (or CTC.) Two additional Contact Tracers have been hired on a part-time basis to assist the department with tracing of probable cases (including notifying close contacts and entering all data into the MAVEN system.)

Director Giacalone explained that, as with Newburyport, other local health departments and the CTC are experiencing back-logs due to the increase in cases; there is also a significant delay between the time when an individual is tested and the time that the test results are received by the Health Department on MAVEN. The delay is frequently four to five days which makes it difficult to report accurate, timely data for the public.

The Department has been notified about some COVID cases and exposures that have occurred at restaurants; however, it appears that most of these incidents have resulted from transmission that took place outside of the workplace. Each instance is investigated and the restaurants are provided with appropriate guidance as to whether they need to close for a period of time for cleaning and whether the employees need to isolate or quarantine, etc. Director Giacalone noted that any time a 'cluster' of cases, defined as two or more cases from the same site, is identified, the Health Department retains oversight of the cases and does not allow them to be sent to the State CTC (Community Tracing Collaborative) for monitoring.

Director Giacalone informed the Board that vaccines for COVID-19 will begin to be distributed within the next two weeks. The first round of doses will be administered only to healthcare personnel. He is still awaiting notification from the State regarding when the local health departments will be involved in vaccine administration, which is likely to take place in the spring. The Department already has an preliminary administration plan which mimics the plan the Department used for the drive-through flu vaccine clinics held in the fall.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recently issued a revision to quarantine guidelines that provided for a reduction from the previous mandatory 14 days of quarantine (with date of last exposure to the positive individual counted as Day #0.) The revised guidelines allow individuals who are identified as 'direct contacts' of persons who have tested positive for COVID-19 but who remain asymptomatic through Day #8 of their quarantine to be tested; and if the results are negative, they may resume activities as of Day #10 (Cases must still self-monitor their health for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19 until Day #14 of their quarantine.) Director Giacalone has heard that the CDC intends to issue a further revision that would allow Direct Contacts to resume their activities (work, etc.) after Day #7 of their quarantine (provided they test negative with a PCR or antigen test on or after Day #5 and remain asymptomatic by Day #7.) The proposed guidelines would also allow Direct Contacts who remain asymptomatic by Day #10 to resume activities without having a test for COVID-19.) Director Giacalone further explained that Direct Contacts that exhibit any symptoms would be required to remain in quarantine until Day #14.

In Newburyport the sites available for COVID-19 testing are Convenient MD on Storey Ave and at Anna Jaques Hospital (which serves predominantly patients that are scheduled for medical procedures or who are admitted through the Emergency Room.)

NEWBURYPORT SKATE PARK – Dr. Blair requested that the Board discuss an article in today's Daily News that indicated that the skate park was slated to be reopened and acknowledged that there had been an issue with lack of social distancing and wearing of face coverings by users of the skate park which, ultimately, led to its recent closure. The newspaper article indicated that a group of volunteers has agreed to oversee activity of the park to ensure that face coverings are worn and social distancing is maintained. The Board decided not to take action at this time but will monitor the situation to see whether the problems are rectified once the park is reopened.

COVID-19 RISK LEVEL - Director Giacalone informed the Board that Newburyport's current COVID risk level remains at "Yellow" per the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MADPH) Weekly COVID Update Report. The report indicated that Newburyport currently has a 4.8 positivity rate (versus 3.42 in the prior report) If the positivity rate reaches 5.0 percent the City will be assigned to the High Risk category.

There has been an increase in cases associated with local long term care facilities, especially at Atria and Port Healthcare. Transmission within long term care facilities has been difficult to track. An outbreak at one facility was deemed to have occurred from an employee that tested positive; subsequent testing of all residents turned up multiple positive results and yet none of the patients ever developed symptoms. The Board requested that the department inquire with the state health department as to whether it is possible to initiate a daily at home screening program for employees of long term care facilities so that any employee that tests positive is immediately kept from entering the facility. Director Giacalone noted that the only screening that the department has been notified of for long term care facilities was conducted in June 2020 as part of establishing a base-line for each facility. If an outbreak occurs in a facility, follow up testing of staff and residents is conducted on a weekly basis.

The department has also received notifications from some large companies about employees testing positive or being quarantined as close contacts. Dianne's Fine Desserts, in particular, has had multiple employees in quarantine and/or isolation. Many of these employees do not live in Newburyport and therefore, the health department is monitoring these as workplace clusters (not as individual cases.) The department is in frequent contact with management from Dianne's and has found that within the facility all required protective measures are being maintained, face coverings are provided and worn by employees at all times. In addition, the state department of public health reached out to Dianne's and also found them to be in compliance with all sector specific requirements. It appears that transmission among these employees is most frequently from carpooling or socializing with one another outside of work, as opposed to onsite transmission.

COVID Testing - Director Giacalone noted that at this time the State Health Department has advised that only three types of tests are approved: PCR, antigen and antibody. He also informed them that COVID-19 testing using the Abbott Binex tests that was recently made available for use in some school districts is limited to testing of students at the school and only after the student has complained of or exhibited symptoms. The Abbott BinexNow tests are not currently authorized for use as a screening tool.

Downtown Santa Hut - The Board discussed the 'Santa Hut' that has been set up at Brown's Square. It was determined that since the activity is conducted outside (no participants enter the hut) that the activity is acceptable in terms of social distancing. Director Giacalone stated that he will contact Frank Cousins, President of the Chamber of Commerce, to confirm that a monitor will be on site to ensure that participants maintain a 6' distance between household parties while waiting in line, and that face coverings will be worn at all times.

Director Giacalone informed the Board that a Christmas Eve Vigil had been proposed to be held on a public street. While religious gatherings are exempt from the social gathering rule, it was discussed by the Board that it is not appropriate for a public street to be shut down for a gathering during the pandemic emergency. The Board determined that the City's Gathering Order should be updated to prohibit closure of City streets.

Motion: Dr. Sam Merabi made a motion to revise the City's Gathering Order to include the following wording that was seconded by Dr. Rob Slocum:

Whereas there is a state of COVID-19 pandemic emergency, no organization shall shut down a city street for the purpose of holding a public gathering, without exception. This order shall be in effect until rescinded by the Board of Health or until the state of emergency has ended.

Vote: Votes in favor of the motion: 3; votes to oppose the motion: 0. Motion passed.

Next Board of Health Meeting will be held remotely on December 17 at 7:00 pm.

Meeting adjourned - 8:37 pm