Establishment of Board of Health

On August 27, 2019, the City Council of South Portland passed Order #44-19/20, creating a Board of Health (BOH). Per the city ordinance, the Powers and Duties of the BOH are to serve as an advisory body to the City’s Local Health Officer (LHO). The City Council may refer specific health-related matters to the BOH for its review and recommendation. Membership of this three (3) member Board, by State law, includes at least one physician and one woman. By ordinance, all members must have experience and knowledge in areas of public health. Finally, the BOH does not currently have a budget and does not expend funds.

For the annual report period, members of the Board of Health were as follows:

Joshua Pobrislo, Health Officer - non-voting (term exp. 10/2/2023)

Dr. Meredith Jackson (term expired 12/3/2020)

Bridget O’Connor (term expiring 12/3/2021)

Dr. Tara Pelletier (term expiring 12/3/2022)

Local Health Officer Staffing and Public Health Infrastructure

The City Council’s first request of the Board of Health was to develop formal recommendations for the City Council regarding changing the current structure/position(s) to help deliver necessary City Health Services. Prior to the first official meeting of the BHO, the City Manager, Scott Morelli, elicited feedback from departments overseeing positions that directly provide current health services, including the Chief of Police and Behavioral Health Liaison; Fire Chief; Local Health Officer (LHO); Code Enforcement Director; City Health Inspector; and Social Services Director. This feedback was then presented to the BOH, to provide the background of some of the current health services and help identify any obvious critical gaps that would assist in making a formal recommendation from the BOH to the City Council in regard to changing the current structure/position(s) to help deliver necessary City Health Services.
In addition, the BOH conducted interviews and invited City stakeholders to participate in BOH meetings, to gather additional information to assist in a more informed recommendation to the City Council. Stakeholders consulted include Superintendent of Schools, School Nurse/District Coordinator of Health Services, Senior Steering Committee member and Human Resources staff.

*Note: Assessment and Recommendations were drafted and delivered pre-Covid.*

**Assessment:**

Based on information provided to and collected, one notable gap identified by the BOH in providing appropriate health services is the lack of systematic data specific to health needs of South Portland residents and community-wide health issues. The Board views this gap as a significant deficit in adequately addressing and promoting the health of residents. A Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA), which utilizes a community engagement approach to collect and analyze health data, would allow the City to develop long-term, evidence-based strategies to improve community health. Results from the CHNA would also provide the Board and Council with an understanding of how resources could be allocated to achieve goals. Specifically, results from the CHNA are necessary for determining whether and how additional staff could effectively support health in the community.

Based on available information, the Board believed the staffing level of the Local Health Officer (LHO) to be adequate for the duties assigned through the state’s mandate. The Board meanwhile acknowledges at the current rate, the LHO’s scope of work is largely reactive, attending to threats of communicable diseases and private nuisance/rodent investigations, rather than proactive and preventative. Initial data gathered from City staff, Committee members and the School Department indicate a need and desire for a focus on prevention.

Finally, the Board identified communication and coordination as priority areas for improving public health. The City’s website does not currently have a designated location to promote health services or public health resources for residents. The City would benefit from a centralized communication platform to increase awareness among residents, as well as City and School staff, of available resources and general health information.

**Recommendations:**

The BOH developed the following recommendations based on this assessment, in order of perceived importance:

1. Contract an independent/outside entity to complete a community needs assessment specific to South Portland regarding public health gaps and recommendations on how best to address them.
2. Retain the hours of the Local Health Officer at 8 hours per week to be revisited after this one-year trial with documentation of activities completed and reviewed in conjunction with the results of the above referenced community needs assessment. This was an increase in time allotted last year and is certainly being utilized at this time, though there may be a role for expanding pending outcome of above needs assessment, especially focusing on preventative services.

3. Increase visibility of both local and statewide resources for public health on our city website – including the Local Health Officer role/contact information and 211Maine.org.

Covid-19 CARES Act Funding Recommendations

On July 30, 2020, the Board of Health received a request from Manager Morelli to develop recommendations for allocating funding from the Keep ME Healthy grant specific to addressing homelessness. Research reveals people who are experiencing homelessness are disproportionately impacted by Covid. They are more vulnerable to contracting the virus and more likely to experience severe illness. Thus, strategies designed to support people who are experiencing homelessness help to minimize community spread while promoting health equity.

On August 5, the Board of Health convened a meeting with the following stakeholders to identify funding priorities: Kevin Adams, Recreation; Chief Timothy Sheehan, SPPD; Dana Baldwin, Behavioral Health Liaison, SPPD; Dept Chief Amy Barry, SPPD; Chief Jim Wilson, SPFD; Josh Pobrislo, Local Health Officer, Community Paramedic/EMT; Becca Bolous, community member and Executive Director of Maine Public Health Association; Sue Henderson, Councilor at Large

Assessment:

Keep ME Healthy funding required grantees to expend funds by October 30. Board members and stakeholders agreed funding must prioritize evidence-based strategies that can be implemented quickly. Further, the group acknowledged that Covid is likely to be present in the community beyond 10/30. Therefore, the Board recommended using these funds to lay the groundwork for efforts to address longer-term goals of promoting housing stability and economic opportunity which we know, in turn, improves public health.

Recommendations:

Recommendations were informed by stakeholder input and guided by the Framework for an Equitable Covid-19 Homelessness Response from the National Alliance to End Homelessness.

These funding priorities included:

1. Community Paramedic Outreach, utilizing teams of City of South Portland Community Paramedics to conduct outreach to and health screenings of people in temporary short-term housing or experiencing homelessness with the goal of preventing Covid infection and illness.
Also included in the recommendations were hygiene supplies, equipment and “provision packages” to support people experiencing homelessness.

The recommendations offered were included in the Cares Act proposal, with the proposal receiving full funding.

Looking ahead

New BOH member: On December 15, 2020 Becca Boulous, MPH, PhD, was sworn as the newest BOH member. Becca will serve a three year term (term expiring 12/15/23).

Officer Roles: BOH members also assigned new board roles for the upcoming year. Dr. Tara Pelletier was identified as the new Chair, and Becca Boulos as Vice Chair.

Meeting schedule: BOH members identified a need for a standing schedule for future meetings. BOH meetings will occur monthly, on the third Tuesday of each month, from 10-11:30.