



THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

March 9, 2021

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Gibbie Harris, MSPH, BSN, Public Health Director, Mecklenburg County

By Rick Handford

Health in the Time of COVID

Colleen Brannan introduced Gibbie Harris, Mecklenburg County's Public Health Director, who oversees more than 800 employees. She graduated from UNC-CH with degrees in Registered Nursing, Master of Science in Nursing, and Master of Science in Public Health.

Gibbie began by noting that this is not only Charlotte Rotary's first meeting in a year, but also her first talk before a live audience in about that same time. To help us remember that there is more to the work of the Health Department than COVID, she pointed out that they were responsible for restaurant and food safety throughout the County, and that the Department provided all the school nurses in the CMS system. They are the largest health department in North Carolina, and one of the largest in the country.

The Department does many things that the public never sees. They monitor diseases of all types and respond to outbreaks in order to keep the issues small and controllable. Many people believe that the duty of Public Health is to provide treatment to the poor, as a last resort for people who have nowhere else to go. In fact, their job is to treat, and provide for the health and safety of the entire community, and when they do it well, they are not widely noticed, which is not a bad thing.

This first anniversary of the COVID pandemic is not one to be celebrated, as it has involved hardship for people all over the world. It has been a year of change and uncertainty. COVID was not understood at the onset, and in many

ways is still not understood. As more has been learned along the way, the response to the virus has changed to accommodate our new knowledge. These changes have not been easy, and have not distributed the hardships equally across the population. Small businesses, especially those that involve close contact with the public, and those people with limited ability to cope with life during normal times have been hurt the worst.

If there is any good news, it is that the metrics used to measure the severity of the virus—number of cases, percentage of positive tests, hospitalizations, deaths, etc. have been trending more positively after a negative spike in January. Restrictions imposed by the government are being relaxed in response to these trends, although in a measured way to avoid a recurrence of the January experience that might lead to renewed tightening.

She was pleasantly surprised by the number present that had been vaccinated, and went on to discuss that we were currently in Phase 3 of vaccine distribution (those over 65 plus front-line workers such as emergency responders and teachers), with Phase 4 (high-risk individuals from 16-64) to begin on March 24, unless the Governor changes his mind before then. Phase 5 will be open to all who want to be vaccinated. She noted that we can administer more vaccine than we are able to get.

Walgreens and CVS were hired by the federal government to provide vaccinations to staff and residents in nursing home and long-term care facilities back in early January, and the Health Department was able to vaccinate those that did not sign up for that program. In December, 54% of all Mecklenburg COVID deaths reported were in these facilities, consistent with the results from the beginning of the pandemic, where the number has remained above 50%. In January, the rate dropped to 34%, and in February it was 20%. She attributes the drop to the vaccine, and strongly recommends that everyone get vaccinated as soon as possible.

Problem areas are that minorities are getting vaccinated at lower rates, that vaccine supply is less than we need (should improve in late March and April), that young people do not see the need to get vaccinated, and that reopening of businesses and schools is needed but moving more slowly than some would like. She believes that controlled reopening, avoiding the need for backtracking, is best. Schools need to be open for in-person learning, and she is frustrated that classroom time is not coming back as fast as sports are.

She gives credit for much of the progress made to date to [Dena Diorio](#), the County Manager, for her support and work to muster the cooperation of other government entities and the medical systems to provide their support to the Health Department as well. She has not experienced this level of support anywhere else during her career.

She discussed the new CDC guidelines allowing vaccinated people to gather with others in small groups, but noted that masks, hand-washing, and social distancing recommendations still apply outside that setting.

She has had to issue two orders during the pandemic, one to restrict a local church from having meetings after significant spread was traced to those; and the second to dismantle a tent city after it was determined to be infested with rats. The residents have been relocated and are receiving assistance with housing, employment, and health issues, and the rats are being eradicated.

In response to questions, she noted that there was never a shortage of beds to deal with COVID patients in the County, and no one needing care was turned away. They had plans for adding an emergency facility to provide additional beds, but the need did not arise.

When asked about the lower age limit of 16 for getting the vaccine, she said that that was the current recommendation, but expected that ongoing research on the vaccines' safety would allow that limit to go lower. She was not aware that those having been vaccinated were any more or less likely to experience false positive test results; and was not able to say how long the vaccination would last, although she would not be surprised to find that yearly booster shots would be recommended to cope with new strains, much as is done with flu shots today.

As the urgency of the pandemic decreases, the Department will be able to focus on other areas, notably health disparity issues, violence prevention, and ensuring that children are born healthy and have the resources available to remain healthy. Removing barriers to people being successful allows them the resources to provide for their health, which makes them more successful, in an ongoing virtuous cycle.

Additional information is available at the Health Department website, <https://www.mecknc.gov/HealthDepartment/Pages/default.aspx>

Thanks to Gibbie for making her first in-person talk at our first in-person meeting!

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/522035408>

Ms. Harris' introduction begins at the 12:00 minute mark.