



**Task Force of Border Health Officials (TFBHO) Meeting  
HHSC Virtual Platform  
May 20, 2021**

Member Name	Yes	No	Professional Representatives (non-members)
Esmeralda Guajardo, MAHS	✓		
Richard Chamberlain, DrPH(c), MPH, RS	✓		
Steven M. Kotsatos, RS		✓	
Josh Ramirez, MPA, CPM	✓		
Eduardo Olivarez	✓		
Arturo Rodriguez, DNP, MPA, CPM	✓		
Angela Mora, M.A.Ed.	✓		
Emilie Prot, DO, MPH		✓	
Lillian Ringsdorf, MD, MPH	✓		
Rachel E. Sonne, MD, MPH	✓		
State Representative Bobby Guerra		✓	
Senator Eddie Lucio Jr.		✓	

**Attendees Present**

Francesca Kupper, John Villarreal, David Gruber, Dr. Allison Banicki, Adriana Corona-Luevanos, Edith de Lafuente, Rosy de los Santos, Alberto Perez, Tony Aragón and Jennifer Nguyen.

**Agenda Item I: Call to Order, Welcome, Chair Remarks, Meeting Logistics and TFBHO Roll Call**

Chair Guajardo called the meeting to order at 1:10 pm. She thanked and welcomed attendees to the Task Force of Border Health Officials (TFBHO) meeting. Chair Guajardo reminded members to announce themselves by stating their name before speaking and to mute their devices when not speaking. She asked if any legislative staff could present themselves and asked if members from DSHS were in attendance. No legislative staff were in attendance; DSHS staff introduced themselves. She asked if Dr. Hellerstedt was in attendance before proceeding. Ms. Kupper confirmed he wasn't attending the meeting. Chair Guajardo introduced Ms. Francesca Kupper, facilitator of the meeting. Ms. Kupper introduced the production staff and read open meeting/virtual platform guidelines and proceeded to the roll call. A quorum was confirmed. Chair Guajardo welcomed and thanked all attendees for joining the meeting.



**Agenda Item II: Approval of December 10, 2020 Meeting Minutes**

Chair Guajardo stated that the December 10, 2020 Meeting Minutes were previously sent to members and asked for a motion to approve them. She asked members to ensure they had reviewed them and requested a motion to approve the minutes. Mr. Chamberlain made a motion to accept the meeting minutes and Mr. Olivarez seconded the motion. Ms. Francesca Kupper took a roll call vote to officially approve the minutes. The meeting minutes were approved.

**Agenda Item III: Update: COVID-19 Vaccine**

Chair Guajardo welcomed Mr. Antonio Aragon, Immunization Unit Director (DSHS) and expressed her appreciation regarding the success of the COVID-19 mass vaccination effort. Mr. Aragon thanked Chair Guajardo and initiated the vaccine update by mentioning significant milestones that had been achieved in recent months. He noted that 21 million doses had been administered to Texans in the last six months. He explained that the figure included people who had only received one dose of the vaccine (Pfizer and Moderna vaccines) and those who were fully vaccinated, including the Johnson & Johnson vaccine (one dose vaccine). Approximately 12 million people had received at least one dose of the vaccine while 9.5 million were fully vaccinated (both doses administered for vaccines that required two doses). He thanked all public health staff for reaching this milestone of vaccinating 21 million within the last six months. He also highlighted this success by comparing it to the *Vaccines for Children Program*, which administers approximately five million doses yearly.

He continued by mentioning the emergency authorization milestone of the Pfizer vaccine now approved for children between the ages of 12-15 by the FDA. The vaccine was originally approved for those 16 years of age and older. Thus far, about 83 thousand children, within this age group, have been vaccinated with hopes of increasing that figure. Mr. Aragon also indicated that the Pfizer vaccine was now approved to be administered with other vaccines if needed. It had been perceived to be a challenge for back-to-school vaccinations but now the Pfizer vaccine can be co-administered with other vaccines, which helps pediatric providers.

Mr. Aragon asked Associate Commissioner David Gruber if he had any additional updates. He also mentioned that even though there had been a decline in COVID-19 vaccination rates, he reminded everyone that thousands of people continued to be vaccinated. It may not be tens of thousands as before, but we're still vaccinating many people and hope to continue to do so. Potential next steps for vaccinating children (aged 12 and older) for COVID-19 as we approach the upcoming school year. He continued by mentioning the *Vaccines at Home Initiative*, which describes efforts to make vaccines fully accessible, considering those who are home-bound or living in rural areas. He concluded by asking if members had any questions for him or Mr. Aragon.

Chair Guajardo thanked them for the vaccination update and asked to extend her appreciation to Dr. Hellerstedt, Commissioner Garcia and DSHS staff for their communication efforts, detailing how responsive staff were in answering questions and promptly returning



phone calls. Reaching vaccination goals regionally is already a huge undertaking but doing so for the entire state is a different ball game. She expressed how impressed she was with the outcome and thanked everyone again for their prompt communication. All other members agreed and expressed their appreciation individually as well.

Mr. Gruber applauded everyone's efforts and expressed how this success is a tribute to all public health partners as part of the Texas Public Health System. Local health departments proved to be the backbone of the public health system, along with pharmacies, throughout this vaccination effort. Mr. Aragon also acknowledged that this major feat was due to the collaboration of all public health systems from local and regional to state and federal. He thanked everyone for being part of this effort.

Chair Guajardo thanked them and expressed that the silver lining was the progress made in the depth of partnerships and communications really exemplified what Public Health truly is.

**Agenda Item IV:                   Review: COVID-19 Response Recommendations in relation to the short-term plan**

Chair Guajardo continued by reminding members that the COVID-related recommendations were part of the short-term plan. She apologized to members because she had intended to draft a letter of such recommendations to Dr. Hellerstedt but was not able to due to the heavy impact of COVID-19 response. She and members decided that these particular recommendations could be included within the November 1, 2020 Report.

**COVID-19 related Recommendations (short term plan)**

- Complete the border surveillance and laboratory capacity assessment and expand it to include capabilities for laboratories to report results and positivity rates directly to LHDs
- Establish and make available local laboratory and testing capabilities available to border public health departments that is regularly available and accessible, low to no cost to include university agreements and state labs
- Strengthen and support strategies improve coordination with Mexico via the Office of Border Public Health
- Involve the School Health Advisory Council in the school response plans to communicable disease reporting/outbreaks, including COVID-19 ...school ventilation, food/safety preparation and preventative measures
- Conduct a school survey on ventilation and A/C in coordination with TEA
- Add COVID-19 surveillance of premature births to the Birth Defects Program at DSHS.

Members agreed with Chair Guajardo and moved on to the discuss the standard recommendations per border public health priority/work group.



**Agenda Item V: Expand: Recommendations in relation to the long-term plan**

Chair Guajardo initiated the recommendation discussion with members. She reminded members that each recommendation required a narrative as was done in the 2018 Report.

Infrastructure:

- Require implementation of Health Information Exchange (HIE) with free access for border public health and providers with potential to serve as a regionwide/statewide electronic medical record communication system

*Chair Guajardo, Dr. Rodriguez, Mr. Olivarez and Ms. Mora noted that HIE funding is a challenge. Dr. Rodriguez will assist Chair Guajardo in drafting a narrative.*

- Ensure funding to allow for permanent, full-time public health professionals (sanitarians, microbiologists, epidemiologists and entomologists) for border public health departments

Chair Guajardo expressed realistic concerns about short-term COVID-related funding and how it impacts local health departments regarding reduction in staff once the funding is gone. Other members agreed and promoted the need for permanent funding and reinforced the need for such professionals, with a special emphasis on needed sanitarians. Mr. Olivarez requested a permanent funding source, possible through ELC funding, especially for border communities and rural areas that traditionally have trouble attracting such professional in those areas. Chair Guajardo will provide a narrative. Dr. Rodriguez requested that entomologists be added to this particular bullet (added above).

- Representation of TFBHO officials on task force/committees established by DSHS involving LHDs

Chair Guajardo and other members decided to keep this recommendation general to ensure a border representative was involved in other DSHS committees, such as the Public Health Funding and Policy Committee. She also thought a new bullet might be considered to include SHACs (School Health Advisory Committees).

Chronic Diseases:

- Establish early intervention components of children's obesity prevention and education
- Establish an educational component on pulmonary complications at advanced age

This recommendation was postponed until Dr. Prot was available to expand on each point.

Maternal and Child Health:

- Add COVID-19 to the Adult Safety Net with the Texas Vaccines for Children Program -

Dr. Ringsdorf agreed with other members that this recommendation could be moved under Communicable Diseases.



- Uphold vaccination requirements for school entry and add COVID-19 vaccine when available

Chair Guajardo asked if this recommendation should also be moved to Communicable Diseases. While Dr. Ringsdorf concurred, she thought a sentence should be added about the Covid-19 vaccine in terms of it being part of back to school vaccines, still being relevant to Maternal Child Health. Dr. Sonne agreed with Dr. Ringsdorf and noted the vaccine has only been approved for emergency use, until it has full FDA approval.

- Support sharing medical knowledge and training of border health professionals in coordination with the Texas Medical Association and the Texas Border Health Caucus

Dr. Ringsdorf stated it is a good idea to keep this recommendation as a separate section because of how pregnant women may have different public health concerns, compared to the rest of the population.

- Establish and fund outreach to pregnant mothers that are more at risk of early delivery and complications due to COVID-19 infection

Dr. Ringsdorf agreed to keep this recommendation. Dr. Rodriguez offered his assistance with this recommendation due to data that his department has collected regarding this topic. Dr. Ringsdorf thanked Dr. Rodriguez and asked if he'd like to join the priority/sub-committee group; he agreed.

Communicable Diseases:

- Expand the OBPH Community Health Workers training curriculum and bilingual educational material for pandemic response, including mental health and COVID fatigue
- Establish Border Public Health Multi-Disciplinary Response Team with trained and bilingual staff, including epidemiologists, sanitarians, nurses and contact tracers. (*currently at work*)
- Evaluate avenues to support hospitals, nursing homes and long term acute care centers in hiring temporary medical staff in the border region. (*currently at work*)

This recommendation was postponed until Dr. Prot was available to expand on each point.

Chair Guajardo mentioned that the Environmental Health Recommendation had one bullet (moved to the penultimate bullet on the COVID-related recommendations) Mr. Kotsatos initiated the recommendation due to ventilation issues at public schools during the pandemic. Chair Guajardo suggested that this recommendation be added as Recommendation C.

Mr. Olivarez commented that Mr. Kotsatos had raised this because of airborne/ventilation issues concerning COVID-19 but thought that it should be broadened to include any type of environmental factors or potential outbreaks that involve social distancing, hygiene and any



type of barriers. This should not only be targeted to schools but any business, offices, etc. He also mentioned examining the potential need to change health and safety codes, specifically about communicable illnesses. Mr. Ramirez suggested that this expansion be given more time to let Mr. Kotsatos have a more complete thought on the topic.

Dr. Sonne mentioned that this work group had met after the last in-person meeting to draft responses to each of the previous four recommendations for part A and one for Part B of the 2018 Recommendations Report. She elaborated on the different points:

A. Vector-borne and Zoonotic Diseases:

- Continue with dedicated certifications for vector control officers/applicators with simpler processes for public health related issues; Revise to specify that it's specifically for public health staff (not for private applicators or vector-borne usage – under direction of certified sprayers)
- Continue to provide resources to increase capacity/mitigation (includes staff, equipment, chemicals, education/training, using innovative methods for mosquito control, GIS, mosquito testing and other evidence-based approaches for ongoing needs and new threats, emergencies and disasters; Revise to further assist with mitigation of vector breeding; DSHS to collaborate with other agencies to revisit the state-wide tire statute (Senator Rodriguez – didn't pass; similar to Laredo's tire ordinance)
- Surveyed local health departments on the border to check on available inventory pertaining to spraying and vector-borne disease prevention, maintenance and management (to have a sense of what's available or not available to share resources, etc.)
- Continue to provide resources to increase capacity for mitigation (equipment inventory to address related issues so that we know what gaps exist to address needs; received inventories from El Paso, Laredo, McAllen, Hidalgo County, Harlingen, Brownsville, Cameron County and Region 8)
- Continue to support for rapid local response/support system for ongoing vector and zoonotic control activities and developing response plans for natural and man-made disasters including flooding, hurricanes or outbreaks; No revision but supports why we took an inventory of border-wide assets for zoonotic disease prevention and management for all health departments along the border to help develop this type of support system

B. Recruit and support the Registered Sanitarian Profession along the border:

- Continue to expand trainings and certifications to improve expansion opportunities to assist with food, water and vector-borne and zoonotic diseases; No additional revisions

C. Conduct a school survey on ventilation and A/C in coordination with TEA

Chair Guajardo and Dr. Sonne agreed that adding the ventilation recommendation above as item "C" with an expanded narrative would be a good idea. Mr. Villarreal commented that he assisted Dr. Sonne with some of the research mentioned by Dr. Sonne and that the topic



of the local response team stemmed from SB 1312, which is currently being worked on within DSHS. He asked who would provide the narrative. Dr. Sonne volunteered to provide the narrative along with the rest of the members of the work group.

Chair Guajardo asked Mr. Villarreal to confirm that there was no deadline to produce the report. He confirmed that there was no deadline but asked each work group meet on their own and send him final narratives to produce a finished product for the November 1, 2020 Recommendations Report.

Because Dr. Prot is unavailable, Dr. Rodriguez volunteered to assist Ms. Mora, Dr. Prot and Mr. Chamberlain with narratives for the Communicable and Chronic Diseases work group recommendations. Chair Guajardo suggested that all work groups produce their narratives within the next two weeks.

**Agenda Item VI: Public Comment**

Chair Guajardo asked Ms. Kupper if there were any public comments submitted. Ms. Kupper confirmed that there were no requests for public comments.

**Agenda Item VII: Closing Remarks, Adjourn and Thank you**

Chair Guajardo reminded members to work on their narratives for the November 1, 2020 Recommendations Report with a deadline of June 4. The next meeting will be on July 15, followed by meetings on October 21 and December 9. Mr. Aragon commented that plenty of flu doses were available, especially for those who are uninsured or underinsured, even though it late in the season. Chair Guajardo thanked him for sharing that news. She expressed appreciation to all the members and adjourned the meeting at 3:17pm.