

West Allis Health Department Rises to Meet Pandemic

By Jenny Kosek



Mayor Devine and WAHD employees at the drive-thru mask giveaway



COVID-19 testing at State Fair Park

The first positive case was March 14.

On that date, the West Allis Health Department (WAHD) was notified that a West Allis resident had tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Within a few days, a second case was confirmed. Then another.

WAHD Deputy Health Commissioner Ashley Palen recalled, “The first few cases really didn’t cause alarm. West Allis Health Department staff are well-versed in communicable disease follow up, and we followed standard protocol in following up with those first few cases. Then things started to close.”

By March 16, local municipalities had ordered mass closures of schools, businesses, seniors centers, and other facilities in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus. By then, the virus was already entrenched in communities, and continued to spread.

The WAHD has always played a vital role in supporting the health of the West Allis and West Milwaukee communities they serve. The WAHD provides health inspections, education, resources, vital records, immunizations, and numerous other services to “protect and promote,” as their slogan says, the health of all people. In 2020, the call to protect and promote rang more loudly than ever for the staff of West Allis Health Department.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, public health departments across the country have received federal funding and placed renewed emphasis on the importance of emergency preparedness planning, including planning for contagious disease events. As the novel coronavirus pandemic unfolded, the

WAHD faced a challenge they could not have prepared for. “This is a new virus,” said Palen. “As the World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) began researching the virus, information changed almost daily. We were able to quickly implement several protocols we had prepared for in prior emergency training, but still had to meet daily with our team to share updates about this virus and evolving recommendations related to it.”

Training scenarios had not prepared WAHD for what is known as “long-term communicable disease tracing,” which would be key to fighting the virus. As health professionals learned more about the coronavirus and how it spreads, “contact tracing” – the process of identifying people who may have come into contact with an infected person and collecting information about those contacts – became increasingly important. Public health nurses at WAHD had prior experience with this process. The WAHD responds to cases of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, by working with infected individuals to understand what interaction that person may have had with others, the WAHD can follow up with anyone who may have come in contact with the infected person. This practice limits the spread of such diseases by allowing anyone who may be at risk of spreading the disease to take precautions, rather than going about their daily activities and potentially infecting others. This practice is hugely important in slowing the spread of the coronavirus, but as cases mounted and months passed, it became very challenging for public health nurses to keep up with the demand.

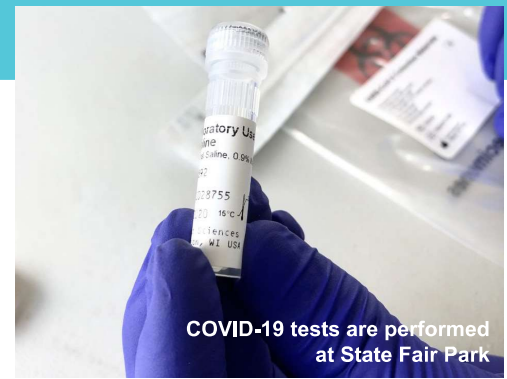
“The duration of this is something we could not have



WAHD employees go door to door handing out masks



Signage is displayed outside the health department



COVID-19 tests are performed at State Fair Park



Statues at the West Allis Police Department wear masks to help promote coronavirus prevention



Masks are given away at the West Allis Farmers Market



Free masks available in Little Free Libraries around West Allis

planned for,” explained Peggy Pipia, Community Health Education Coordinator. “Not only is the incubation period of the coronavirus quite long at up to fourteen days, but the spread itself was rapid and continuous for months. That made contact tracing more time consuming than we could have ever expected.”

To assist the public health nurses, 12 staff from other WAHD divisions were trained to perform this work. In addition, federal funding was received to hire 15 additional contact tracers. The contact tracer team worked around the clock to follow up with individuals who tested positive for the coronavirus and anyone they may have come in contact with while contagious.

While contact tracers were hard at work, other WAHD staff were busy providing information to businesses and residents to help them stay safe during the pandemic. “Every new headline prompted new questions,” recalled Public Health Specialist Frances Thomas. “We had to work to help people understand that information that changed was not information that was wrong. Our understanding of the virus simply changed as more time passed and more research was done.”

Businesses were proactive about working with WAHD environmentalists on reopening safely. Environmentalists spent time with business owners strategizing how to rearrange seating to create social distancing, and worked with businesses on mask guidelines and sanitization procedures. WAHD staff were also busy fielding calls from residents, reporting businesses that were not complying with safety guidelines, or asking about their own level of safety as regular activities resumed.

Using federal funding, the WAHD also launched public education efforts about mask safety and steps to take to reduce transmission of the coronavirus. Banners, mailers, and social media messaging were produced in Spanish and English. The Liberty Heights Neighborhood Association partnered with the WAHD to deliver nearly 1,000 kits that contained information, hand sanitizer, and masks in the Liberty Heights area. The WAHD worked with senior living facilities to provide masks for residents. Through mask drive-through giveaway events, Little Free Libraries, and other outreach events, the WAHD distributed thousands of free masks this year.

Although the WAHD did not offer coronavirus testing, a partnership with

the National Guard allowed for three days of free, drive-through testing at State Fair Park in August. Over 1,000 tests were administered.

As the pandemic challenged the community, the WAHD also worked closely with City departments to provide referrals and resources to residents. Closer collaboration made it easy for the WAHD to refer those in need to housing, utility, and other resources provided by the City.

“The partnerships we’ve built with other City departments and local and national organizations have been a silver lining of the pandemic,” noted Thomas. “WAHD has always worked closely with community partners, but we strengthened those relationships and built new ones during this crisis.”

Indeed, relationships have driven WAHD through 2020. Though faced with an uphill battle because we are dealing with a new virus, the staff at the West Allis Health Department are dedicated and passionate professionals who will continue to do their best to address this public health challenge. Health Commissioner Bob Leischow reminds everyone that we’re all in this together and calls on residents and businesses to continue doing their part to stop the spread.