



## **Keeping Our Communities Safe and Thriving: The Role of Public Health**

Executive Summary from Feb. 22, 2022, Town Hall

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past two years, COVID-19 has created a public health emergency. The pandemic has killed nearly one million Americans and disrupted communities.<sup>1</sup> Public health departments, which exist to keep people safe and healthy, have become an even more vital protective force in American society as we respond to the unprecedented strain created by the pandemic. Yet during this crisis, the pandemic has been politicized. The authority of local, state and federal public health entities has been targeted or questioned. In 2021 alone, 26 states adopted laws that permanently weakened the authority of public health departments, in many cases by shifting the power to issue critical public health and safety orders from local or state health officials to state politicians with no expertise in health. In many localities, COVID-19 vaccine mandates are now banned, and, in some places, laws have been implemented that result in a permanent ban or limit on mask mandates. These actions reflect a concerning shift in overall attitudes toward public health and have potentially dangerous implications for the health and safety of Americans.

In a Feb. 22, 2022, town hall produced by the American Public Health Association, the COVID Collaborative and the Alliance for Disease Prevention and Response, an esteemed panel of experts came together to highlight the value of public health. They addressed key challenges that have emerged, and

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<sup>1</sup> Note: In mid-May 2022, the United States reached a million deaths from COVID-19; unfortunately, almost half of these deaths occurred in the past year when vaccines were widely available. McPhillips D. More than 1 million people have died of Covid-19 in the US. CNN Health, May 17, 2022. Available from: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/17/health/us-reports-1-million-covid-deaths/index.html>

shared examples of how policymakers, leaders of institutions and everyday citizens can help protect the health of their communities. Former CNN News Anchor Frank Sesno moderated the session which featured a diverse group of speakers<sup>2</sup>.

Presenters gave listeners a deeper understanding of public health's broad role in keeping communities healthy, resilient and thriving during a pandemic. To start the discussion, APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, asked speakers questions such as, "Where do we go from here?" and "What are the implications for the other elements of public health at play?" They also inspired listeners to act, learn more about the issues at hand and become public health advocates in their own communities.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following takeaways reflect the most salient messages the town hall participants shared. They can be used by policymakers, advocates, public health officials and more to understand what makes a strong and effective public health system, what drives resistance to public health, and what can be done to restore the strength of America's public health infrastructure.

1. Public health systems must be empowered with the resources and authority to respond swiftly and equitably to health crises.
2. Science—not politics—should guide an effective response to public health emergencies.
3. The recent politicization of and attacks on public health are largely a result of a need for better communication and understanding about its overall intentions and benefits.
4. Changes to public health policies have not been only negative—some legislation has passed to strengthen public health systems.
5. Preemption has had negative effects on the ability of public health officials to do their jobs both during the COVID-19 pandemic and before, though there are ongoing efforts to combat it.

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<sup>2</sup> Speakers List: Mike Leavitt, former Utah Governor, EPA Administrator and U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services; Kathleen Sebelius, former Kansas Governor and Insurance Commissioner, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services; Luke Kenley, JD, former Indiana State Senator and Noblesville City Court Judge; Mysheika Roberts, MD, MPH, Health Commissioner for Columbus Public Health; Hemi Tewarson, JD, MPH, Executive Director, National Academy for State Health Policy; Cynthia Hallett, MPH, President and CEO of Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights and the ANR Foundation; Ray Hart, PhD, Executive Director, Council of the Great City Schools; Corey Astill, JD, Vice President, Health and Retirement, Smart Regulation; Eduardo Sanchez, MD, Chief Medical Officer for Prevention, American Heart Association; Georges Benjamin, MD, Executive Director, American Public Health Association; Julie Morita, MD, Executive Vice President, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; and John Bridgeland, CEO, COVID Collaborative.

6. Public health maneuvers work. Mask mandates, social distancing and other public health actions have successfully reduced the impacts of COVID-19 on school districts, communities and businesses.
7. There are reasons to be optimistic for the future of public health, despite recent setbacks.

## INSIGHTS FROM PRESENTERS

Lessons from the presenters provided more nuance about the role that public health should play in our communities. Presenters shared how to maintain and strengthen the authority to protect the public and build back trust in public health following the pandemic.

Here are notable messages and lessons from town hall participants:

Public health systems must be empowered with the resources and authority to respond swiftly and equitably to health crises.

Julie Morita, MD, executive vice president of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, shared that in her past career positions, she dealt with several potential disease outbreaks and health crises that she could prevent or contain because her public health department could take immediate action through mandates and quarantines. She emphasized the importance of that authority to act in her comments.

- “It’s critical for public health officials to have the authority to act quickly and nimbly in order to protect and save lives.” (11:57)

Morita also emphasized how COVID-19 disproportionately impacted low-income communities. She explained that every tool available must be used to ensure that low-income communities and communities of color are appropriately served.

- “All too often, at baseline these communities don't have a fair shot living the healthiest lives possible. We need to use every tool available to make sure all communities have the means and the power to thrive. This includes ensuring access to testing and vaccines in the hardest-hit neighborhoods. But, right now, in too many places that's not happening because state lawmakers have blocked efforts to prioritize health equity.” (13:41)

Former Kansas Governor and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius emphasized that the federal government has access to better, more robust resources than most states. She said it is imperative that these resources be called upon and mobilized in a quick and trustworthy manner.

- “We had a flood in the town of Joplin following a huge tornado. Joplin is by a [state] border... so both Missouri and Kansas were involved in this situation. People died. The hospital was wiped out. Homes were wiped out. But very quickly the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] was mobilized to come in and bring additional personnel, set up a temporary hospital, test and make sure that the water was safe to drink, to let people come back into their homes and to do a variety of things backing up the state and local leaders who did not have the resources or the expertise to deal with that situation.” (19:45)

Likewise, Mysheika Roberts, MD, MPH, the health commissioner for Columbus Public Health in Ohio, emphasized the importance of having public health services at the ready to respond in a crisis. She expressed the real need to empower governments and local leaders with the authority to act swiftly in response to health emergencies.

- “When you get a car, you must have car insurance. You might not ever get in an accident, but you must have car insurance. Public health is very similar to that, and you don't want a policy that doesn't cover a fire to your vehicle. You want a policy that covers all aspects... you want public health to be able to respond to anything—pandemic as well as an individual case of something that could spiral out of control in your community.” (52:18)

Science – not politics – should guide an effective response to public health emergencies.

Health experts cited the politicization of public health decisions and legislation as one of the central problems and key differences when comparing the COVID-19 pandemic to past public health emergencies. Politics, rather than science, has played a large part in informing public health decisions and legislation. Speakers emphasized the need to defer to science as the basis for efforts to combat national health emergencies.

- “The health system was there for my emergency appendectomy when I developed peritonitis at three years of age. I remember so clearly getting vaccinated at my school for polio, measles, rubella, and other vaccine-preventable diseases. Public health really felt like a blessing and a cultural norm. Speaking with Dr. Julio Frank, who's a member of our COVID Collaborative,

recently about the next move from pandemic to endemic, he remarked that he had lived through six pandemics and COVID was different from all of them in how strongly politics played a role.” (9:22) – John Bridgeland, CEO, COVID Collaborative

- “I watched a relatively new president sworn in in January dealing with [a pandemic] crisis in April, May, and June of his first year say, ‘I’m going to defer to the science. I’m going to listen to the scientists. I’m going to make sure that my entire government is hands-on dealing with this situation, but the science is going to lead the way.’ ... We saw in 2020 a flip of that, where from the bully pulpit of the presidency a different kind of communication was issued trying to downplay the virus and contradict the scientific issues, and I think unfortunately we are going to pay for that for potentially decades to come.” (22:11) – Kathleen Sebelius
- “The undermining of science as a lead in public health emergencies is something that we all have to take very seriously” (23:01) – Kathleen Sebelius
- “During this pandemic, the dichotomy between my authority as a health commissioner and the necessary collaborations with federal, state and community partners—each with their own perspective, political interests, and ideas of how to best respond—played out in unexpected and challenging ways.” (45:19) – Mysheika Roberts

The recent politicization of and attacks on public health are largely a result of a need for better communication and understanding about its intentions and benefits.

Former Utah Governor and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, argues that debates and political turbulence surrounding masks, vaccines and COVID-19 are less rooted in disagreements about the disease. They are rooted more in concerns about the role government should play in citizens’ lives instead.

- “So, to those of you who are struggling as I have with why we have such a difficulty with masks and why there's so much controversy over vaccines and public policymaking, I just want to make the point clear here that this isn't just about masks or vaccines or public policy. It's really about what is the role of government in lives of people, and my suggestion to you is that we need to confront that issue, actually open up the real issue which is ‘What I hear you saying is that you really don't like the government telling you what to do’.” (33:45)

Eduardo Sanchez, MD, MPH, FAAFP, Chief Medical Officer for Prevention at the American Heart Association, echoed Leavitt’s sentiment during his closing statements.

- "Be bold, be confident, but also, be ready to listen...Sometimes, you've just got to stop and listen and understand where people are. Validate that...you can understand where they are and use that as the point to begin that discussion, that journey." (1:36:19)

Former Indiana state senator Luke Kenley likewise emphasized the need for a shift in the messaging around COVID-19. He suggested that, if communicated properly, it can be conveyed that a large public health presence in our lives can be “economically beneficial to everybody” and that “the level of intrusions is not necessarily the point that we need to be arguing about.” (53:13)

- “We need to...broaden [the conversation] to these other serious public health issues that the people can relate to and understand...even the most conservative person is going to agree that ‘Yes that’s right, these things do work’ and ‘Yes we do have this need in our rural counties.’” (53:30)

Preemption has had negative effects on the ability of public health officials to do their jobs both during the COVID-19 pandemic and before it, though there are ongoing efforts to combat it.

Hemi Tewarson, JD, MPH, executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy pointed out that preemption, a legal tactic, has been used throughout the pandemic in response to the actions of public health officials:

- “Preemption...is when a higher level of government removes or limits the authority of a lower level of government, and so some of the examples of preemptive laws are state laws that have been enacted that prohibit the ability of the executive branch or local health authorities from issuing mask mandates, or requiring COVID-19 vaccinations, or limiting the power of public health officials to order quarantine or isolation...These laws...as written, will have broader impact as they will limit the ability of state executive branches or local health departments from taking action in the future.” (57:56)

Cynthia Hallett, MPH, President and CEO of Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights, touched on the effect of preemption on public health authority in the context of campaigns for smoke-free environment legislation:

- “Currently over 62% of the U.S. population is protected by either a local or statewide smoke-free workplace, restaurant, and bar law, but you know that leaves some big gaps. Many of those gaps, not all, but many of them, are in states that preempt local activity. We do still have challenges with preemption and in fact, in the last two years, we’ve seen kind of an uptick in something called exempt and preempt.” (1:09:23)

While preemption has historically challenged public health officials’ ability to act, Hallett pointed out that there is still progress being made:

- “In Tennessee, which by the way is a state with preemption, so localities could not adopt a law...During the pandemic, we took what was a campaign to work with musicians and do smoke-free bar nights and have musicians perform...and we talked a little bit about how to navigate the political scene in a state that really wasn’t very open to local control...What started off as a voluntary campaign in Nashville has grown into a legislative campaign where we now have a bill to repeal preemption in Tennessee, on that one narrow provision.” (1:21:04)

Changes to public health policies have been both positive and negative— some legislation has passed to strengthen public health systems.

While most legislative activity has focused on ways to combat or address COVID-19, Tewarson reminded listeners of several initiatives and laws that have aimed more broadly to improve public health since the onset of COVID-19.

- “Public health advisory boards have been established to advise and provide feedback to the government public health system and provide formal recommendations on public health infrastructure.” (1:00:11)
- “Some of the laws require some form of written explanation or justification for actions taken so governors have to state specific reasons for why you will close a school, or a business, and they require written, fact-based, public explanations for declarations and extensions of states of emergency.” (1:00:40)

- “There are some examples of laws that really expanded the health system capacities to support public health.” (1:01:00)

Public health maneuvers work: Mask mandates, social distancing and other public health actions have successfully reduced the impacts of COVID-19 on school districts, communities and businesses.

Ray Hart, PhD, Executive Director of the Council of the Great City Schools, noted that public health departments have benefited communities in clear ways:

- “I think we've seen it throughout the country where we've been able to enact mask mandates in our schools, or whether our districts have done that. We've been able to mitigate the spread of the virus and keep kids safe in schools. We've been able to reopen schools successfully. I think the partnerships that we've had both with public health to lift vaccination clinics, many of which were staffed by our public health departments, have benefited our communities.” (1:22:35)

Corey Astill, JD, vice president for health and retirement and smart regulation for the Business Roundtable, also agreed that public health and policies that empower businesses to oversee their employees' health to keep employees safe.

- “This experience showed that ensuring that federal, state, and local governments, including the critical public health functions, are prepared to respond to novel and changing circumstances. We believe public health played an important role to support businesses by keeping employees and customers safe and informed about how to handle the immediate impacts of the pandemic and then transition back to [a] new safer way of operating considering the ongoing pandemic risks.” (1:16:16)

There are reasons to be optimistic for the future of public health, despite recent setbacks.

The town hall concluded by underscoring the reasons we should be optimistic for the future of public health in the United States.

- “I’m a “possibilist.” We should all be “possibilists” and realists at the same time, and this can be done because it is getting done in places already.” (1:27:41) - Eduardo Sanchez
- “This is very difficult stuff because we’re at a very difficult time. [We’re] polarized anyway but exacerbated by this terrible pandemic that has driven so many people into so many places and delivered so much pain. But we can do it and people do want hope. I think there’s some of that here too.” (1:37:52) – Frank Sesno
- “There are also legislative efforts that are focused on improving public health. So, there are laws that are addressing collective decision making, strengthening local public health authority, increasing transparency, reflecting on lessons learned, and investing federal dollars .... in public health capacity. (59:08)” – Hemi Tewarson

## CONCLUSION

Aiming to inspire change, the town hall presenters urged all attendees to convene, listen to the problems around them, and collectively seek solutions to problems regarding community health and safety. Speakers said public health systems need the authority to make science-driven decisions and act on them to avert crisis; warning that problems can quickly escalate if there are barriers to action. Although the recent wave of restrictive legislation is threatening public health’s ability to act decisively, there have been some silver linings, including places where public health authorities gained strength in response to the crisis. While science-driven guidance is vital to addressing public health challenges, breaking through to resistant audiences will require careful and regular communication. This communication must address areas of confusion or concern to better understand apprehension about government overreach and other disruptions to daily life. Effective implementation of public health guidance requires a whole of society effort, from schools to small business, to local, state, territorial, tribal and federal governments.

Eduardo Sanchez ended the conversation with a powerful point:

- "I think about the [Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report] publication that described the public health achievements of the 20th century...public health...increased the life expectancy by 30 years...Vaccination is on the top of that list...motor vehicle safety is a part of it, safer workplaces [are] a part of it, safer, healthier foods...reduced cardiovascular disease and stroke deaths, fluoridation of drinking water, and reduced tobacco use. That work, in any one of those areas, was really, really hard work. We who are interested in the public's health have learned to know

how to swim upstream, against strong currents...we stay determined, focused, and undeterred."  
(1:29:16)

While the COVID-19 pandemic has tested us and shaken our public health system, experts believe there are reasons to be optimistic about the future of public health, and that it is important to keep pushing to make our systems stronger, more resilient and more equitable.