



# COVID-19 Advisory Commission on African American Disparities

## MINUTES

January 14, 2021

7:30 AM

Via Zoom

**Chair:** Jill Upson, Chairperson and Director  
Herbert Henderson Office of Minority Affairs (HHOMA)

**Commissioners:** Pastor Rahsaan Armand, Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church  
Owens Brown, State Conference of NAACP  
Joylynn Fix, WV Offices of the Insurance Commission  
Delegate Sean Hornbuckle, House District 16, Cabell County  
Mike Jones, Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action (KISRA)  
Reverend James Patterson, Institute Church of the Nazarene  
Senator Patricia Puertas-Rucker, Jefferson County, Senatorial District 16  
Tiffany Samuels, WVU Cancer Institute  
Keisha Saunders, Tug River Health Clinic

**Presenters:** Dr. Ayne Amjad, Commissioner, BPH; State Health Officer  
Dr. James Arnaez, MPH PhD, Lead Epidemiologist, Health Statistics Center  
Sonia Chambers, Executive Director, West Virginia Health Information Network  
Dr. Clay Marsh, WV COVID-19 Czar, WVU Medicine Vice President  
Colonel Tanya McGonegal, WV National Guard

The meeting was called to order at 7:33 a.m. by Director Jill Upson.

Director Jill Upson extended another request to task force members to participate in the "Ambassador Series" about personal vaccine journeys.

Dr. Clay Marsh shared the following update for the meeting:

- The highest number of deaths in entire pandemic occurred on Tuesday.
- Hospital numbers are leveling off due to the Thanksgiving surge coming to an end. The next surge is anticipated in 7-10 days.
- Concerns with returning to school and in-school transmissions. Studies show that schools are safe for children.
- There are two new mutant viruses. There is no reason to panic at this point; these strains do not make you more ill. UK strain is already in US. Continue to use masks.
- Two Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) vaccines in use in US: Pfizer and Moderna. Another class of vaccine is coming from Johnson and Johnson, which has been well-tolerated.
- West Virginia is the first state in the US to exceed 6 vaccines per 100 people.

Secretary Bill Crouch added that calls have been received from other states and countries asking for information. The overall success was attributed to working together, with the task force being an important part. For example, Reverend Patterson was asked to step up and offer immunizations in communities of color.

Reverend James Patterson provided an update on the Surge Testing Project, which has four teams across the state. He noted that the process to get the project running was faster than he has every experienced. Anyone interested in scheduling testing in their area should contact Romelia Hodges, Project Coordinator. Vaccinations will be offered once funding is secured. Reverend Patterson expressed concerns of moving the testing indoors.

Chairperson Upson inquired about how the cold storage requirements would be handled once vaccinations are offered at the testing locations. Reverend Patterson responded the vaccine which does not require extreme cold storage would be administered.

Chairperson then shared that the latest information is not being disseminated to teachers and that there is great concern about the safety of returning to school.

Dr. Ayne Amjad responded that the concerns of returning to school are understood. Over 7,000 teachers and personnel over the age of 50 were vaccinated. The Board of Education and Board of Health will address the concerns about the classroom setting. Dr. Amjad stated that it takes time for the information to be disseminated and that everything is happening so quickly.

Mike Jones added to the discussion about the susceptibility of younger children and the inability to move around freely. He then asked for clarification of the two Gorillas testing positive for COVID at the San Diego Zoo.

Dr. Marsh explained that the data shows that infection rates in older children come from in-home contact. He then explained the results of a study conducted in Iceland. Dr. Marsh stated the infected gorillas was not a surprise for two reasons: primates are related closely to humans, genetically, and COVID is a very adaptable disease.

Owens Brown opened discussion about a memo that was sent by Reverend Watts. Dr. Marsh confirmed that it was received and had been forwarded leadership. Mr. Brown continued on to discuss some of the suggestions listed in the memo, such as lowering the vaccination age to 60 years for African Americans, morbidity rates, and

reserving vaccinations for African Americans. Dr. Marsh responded that pandemic leadership would need to be involved in addressing the needs of African Americans and other communities in the state.

Romelia Hodges expressed concerns about the new South African strain, which appears to be vaccine and antibody resistant. Dr. Marsh explained that the UK strain is here, but that he is not as confident that the South African strain is in US yet. He then explained the two or three ways to achieve immune competence to the virus through antibodies and monoclonal treatments. Pfizer believes its vaccine will work against the South African strain. The discussion continued to explain inconclusive, presumptive positive individuals, and PCR results.

Sonia Chambers, Executive Director of the West Virginia Health Information Network was introduced by Delegate Sean Hornbuckle. Director Chambers explained the focus of WVHIN and how the agency has been coordinating with Dr. James Arnaez to solidify the data. WVHIN is the state's health information exchanges which can help to id race and ethnicity. She then offered to join the task force calls whenever appropriate.

Dr. Arnaez provided a brief update; reporting that issues with the standard file are being corrected. He added that the WVHIN data will be a nice supplement.

The meeting adjourned at 8:35 a.m.

No votes or actions were taken at the meeting.

A recording of the full meeting is available at <https://minorityaffairs.wv.gov/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx> .