

History of Public Health in Lorain County, Ohio

Interviews, historical review, timeline, and summary compiled by Talia Nadel, Oberlin College, May 10, 2017.

Updated by Chad Sargent, June 20, 2023.

1919 – The Hughes-Griswold Act

The Hughes-Griswold Act, passed in 1919, established municipal and general health districts across the state of Ohio to ensure that the state could effectively respond to public health crises. Although all municipalities in Ohio were required to form a Board of Health in 1893, after a statewide smallpox epidemic in 1917 and the nationwide influenza epidemic in 1918, it became clear that a more comprehensive and formalized approach to public health was necessary.

In April 1919, Representative Hughes of Lorain introduced a law that established 102 health districts of two classes: municipal (in cities over 25,000) and general health (villages and townships). Each health district was required to have a full-time health commissioner, at least one full-time public health nurse, and at least one full-time clerk. While the bill did not pass before the legislature adjourned, when they reconvened, the legislature passed the Hughes Bill with the Griswold Amendment in December of 1919. The amendment allowed for cities of 5,000 people or more to constitute a city health district and altered requirements for the Board of Health.

March 20, 1920 – The Board Votes to Locate the Health District in Oberlin

At their second meeting, the Lorain County Board of Health voted to locate the health district's office in Oberlin. They argued that Oberlin had a geographically central location and would therefore be easily accessible by the rural community. Additionally, a small laboratory already existed in town for the health district to use.

August 1926 – Typhoid Epidemic

In August 1926, a typhoid epidemic began in Wellington that lasted for about three months. There were 156 cases of typhoid fever in Lorain County that year, in comparison to only seven the previous year. Epidemiologists traced the start of the epidemic to an infected milk supply. An employee at a dairy farm was a carrier and had infected the entire supply.

1927-1928 School Year – Standard Health Program Implemented

Dr. Barrett, health commissioner at that time, set up a health program in the schools with a standard of health accomplishments for students. This program included a "Health Record Card" and a "Blue Ribbon - First Premium for Health." The healthiest school received a silver cup at the "Healthy Day Celebration" in May.

1934 – Tuberculosis Care Program

The health district implemented a program to catch tuberculosis infections early, when it was easiest to cure. All school children were to be skin-tested, and receive x-rays should they test positive.

1935 – Social Security Act

The passage of the Social Security Act increased funding for the health district. Using this subsidy, the district hired two nurses, one sanitarian, and one clerk.

1951 – Passage of the Wheeler Act (ORC 3709.29)

The Wheeler Act provided for a voted public health levy for general health districts of up to .5 mill for one year. The law was later changed to allow a levy to continue for 5 years.

1953 – Passage of First Levy

Under the leadership of Dr. Fisher, then health commissioner, a half-mill levy passed, providing the health district with much-needed funding.

1954 – The Health District Hires its First Health Educator

The health district hired a health educator for the first time in 1954. For many years after that there was only one health educator. Eventually, the program grew into the division of Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Prevention.

December 1956 – Health District Moves to 220 W. Lorain St., Oberlin

For the first 36 years of the district's history, its offices were located within Oberlin's City Hall. To account for the expansion of the Health District and the county itself, the agency moved to larger offices in Oberlin at 220 W. Lorain Street.

1966 – Medicare Takes Effect

After the Medicare Act was signed in 1965, it went into effect, ensuring all U.S. residents 65 and over would have health insurance, regardless of income or medical history. The act led to the expansion of the nursing division, and also allowed for home care agencies to receive reimbursements.

June 1967 – The Health District Moves to Murray Ridge Road in Elyria

In 1967, the health district moved out of Oberlin into offices on Murray Ridge Road in Elyria. As they continued expanding, an addition to the Murray Ridge Road building was constructed and completed in the year 1980.

1971 – Amendment to ORC 3709.29

An amendment to ORC 3709.29 allowed levies to be one mill instead of a half mill, and also allowed for a levy to be effective for 10 years instead of five years.

November 5, 1974 – The Levy Fails for the First Time

Beginning in 1953, the levy had successfully passed every five years. However, this effort failed in 1974. Because of this failure the health district had to lay off 13 employees, which amounted to one-third of the agency's staff. Seven of the employees were public health nurses, two were sanitarians (including future health commissioner Ken Pearce), and four were clerks. The levy failure also led to a reduction in health services, particularly in schools. The district also had to discontinue home visits except in special cases.

1975 – Creation of Adult Clinics

After receiving a grant from the Western Reserve Office on Aging, the health district began running adult clinics. When the grant period ended, the Health Commissioner and Board of Health made the decision to continue maintaining the clinics, which ran until 2017.

1978 – Creation of the WIC Department

Four years after the program was introduced on the federal level, WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) came to Lorain County. The first year, the program served about 150 people, and that number has grown to about 5,000 people per year. WIC products used to be on a home delivery system; clients would fill out a paper form, mail that form to Columbus, and then have their groceries delivered within a ten-day window. In 1999, the state switched to a coupon system, and clients could purchase items using the vouchers at designated grocery stores. Finally, in 2015, Ohio began using an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) system.

1984 – Health Promotion Block Grant

The health district received a block grant to hire more health educators. Until this time, the health district had only had one health educator at a time since 1954.

1986-1987 – Creation of AIDS Task Force

Given the rising AIDS epidemic, Health Commissioner Ken Pearce established an AIDS task force to combat the syndrome in Lorain County. The task force partnered with Oberlin College and a local doctor to do testing and peer counseling at the college; a program still runs today under the name "HIV Peer Testers." Additionally, HIV testing is available through the health district for anyone who lives in Lorain County, Ohio.

1988 – Home Care Stops Serving Elyria and Lorain

Because the cities of Elyria and Lorain did not pay taxes to the Lorain County General Health District, the Home Care agency was forced to stop doing visits in those two cities for budgetary reasons. A number of nurses were laid off at this time.

1998 – Home Care Closes

Hospitals started to privatize and create their own home care divisions, which made this service less financially possible for the health district to continue running their Home Care division. They had previously received patient referrals from hospitals, but these referrals stopped coming once the hospitals developed their own agencies, except in the cases of patients without insurance. When the Home Care division closed, some of the nurses were unable to stay on at the health district. Some went on to continue doing home care at private hospital agencies. Many nurses did stay, though, and continued their work in other divisions.

August 2016 – PHAB Accreditation

After three years and under the direction of Health Commissioner Dave Covell, the health district became accredited. The accreditation team spearheaded this effort, which was received through the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB). The health district was the first health department in Ohio to receive accreditation under the PHAB Standards and Measures Version 1.5.

January 2017 – The Municipal Districts and the General District Merge

At the beginning of 2017, the municipal health departments of Elyria and Lorain officially merged with the Lorain County General Health District (LCGHD). This merger had been a possibility for many years, but most believed it was unlikely to actually happen. For example, in the early 1980's, the mayor of Lorain suggested merging, but it did not come to pass. The idea became popular again in the late 1990's, but the parties ultimately decided against it.

Discussions became more serious in 2010, when the mayors of Lorain and Elyria met with the health commissioners of the two municipal health districts and of the general health district. Dr. Church, the president of the Lorain County Community College until his retirement in June 2016,

was also involved in the discussion and negotiations. Neither the Board of Health of a city or county, nor the Health Commissioner has the power to make the final decision about merging; instead, it is the District Advisory Council and the City Council who ultimately decide.

When the merger became official in January 2017, employees from both municipal districts came to the health district on Murray Ridge Road, which now proudly serves all of Lorain County, Ohio.

2018 – LCGHD Updates Its Name

In 2018, after research and careful consideration, the Lorain County General Health District updated its name to Lorain County Public Health (LCPH). This new name has the three words required to be in the name— Lorain County Health. The name conforms to the national recommendation and provides recognized credibility. It is also easier to say, understand, and recall.

2019-2023 – The COVID-19 Pandemic

In late December 2019, China reported the first cases of a new disease. This disease became known as the 2019 Novel Coronavirus. The name later changed to COVID-19, which is short for “Coronavirus Disease 2019.”

The U.S federal government declared a public health emergency due to COVID-19 on February 2, 2020. The first case of COVID-19 in Ohio was confirmed on March 9. The first confirmed COVID-19 case in Lorain County was found on March 14. Restaurants and bars were restricted on March 15, only being allowed to sell takeout and delivery. On March 23, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine issued a Stay at Home order. During this time, LCPH worked to provide up-to-date information and guidance. LCPH helped schools and businesses operate under these new conditions and shared safe holiday guidance. Restrictions lasted for over a year, until June 2, 2021, when restaurants were allowed to fully reopen.

To monitor COVID-19 in the community, LCPH used contact tracers. These workers made phone calls to Lorain County residents who tested positive for COVID-19 to monitor their health and find out who else might have been exposed. School nurses trained to act as contact tracers in April 2020. Ten dedicated contact tracers were hired in June 2020. As cases increased, ten more contact tracers were hired in July 2020. These contact tracers literally saved lives. In August, LCPH contact tracer David Ramos was interviewing a man with confirmed COVID-19 on the phone, and the man stopped responding to his questions. The contact tracing team called 911. The man woke up in the ICU three days later. After recovering, he called back to thank LCPH for saving his life.

As vaccines were researched and Ohio developed a vaccine plan, LCPH prepared for vaccine clinics. LCPH’s first vaccine clinic was on Dec. 23, 2020. In 2021, LCPH hosted nearly 250 vaccine clinics at 85 unique locations. To help reach everyone in the county, LCPH worked with local hospitals, churches, grocery stores, and other community partners. Once vaccines became available for children, LCPH adapted clinics to include child-friendly spaces.

On May 11, 2023, the federal public health emergency declaration ended. At this point, a total of 91,713 cases of COVID-19 and 1,082 COVID deaths had been reported in Lorain County. Additionally, 214,278 Lorain County residents had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. LPCH continues to monitor COVID-19 in the county and offer vaccines and guidance.

Health Commissioners of Lorain County

- March 20, 1920 – October 1, 1925: Dr. W. A. McIntosh
- October 1, 1925 – May 31, 1927: Dr. I. C. Riggan
- June 1, 1927 – June 1, 1931: Dr. C. D. Barrett
- June 1, 1931 – June 1, 1934: Dr. H. R. O'Brien
- August 15, 1934 – July 1941: Dr. F. R. Dew
- September 23, 1941 – June 15, 1944: Dr. Lorin E. Kerr
- June 15, 1944 – November 1, 1945: Dr. F. W. Vincent
- November 1, 1945 – July 31, 1976: Dr. Marion G. Fisher
- July 31, 1976 – March 31, 1982: Betty Wolfe, MPH, BSN, RN
- April 1, 1982 – August 31, 2012: Ken Pearce, MPH
- September 1, 2012 – October 31, 2012: Patricia Schrull, PhD, MEd, MSN, RN
- October 31, 2012 – December 31, 2021: David Covell, MPH, RS
- January 1, 2022 – Present: Mark Adams, MPH, REHS