

Roles and Responsibilities of Board of Health Members

Transcript

This training is an introduction to the *Roles and Responsibilities of Board of Health Members*. The topics covered include:

1. Who serves on the county board of health in Georgia;
2. County board of health management and operations;
3. Primary functions of the county board of health; and
4. The ethical obligations of board membership.

Introduction to Public Health in Georgia

Both the state Department of Public Health and the county boards of health govern the public health system in Georgia. Public health services are provided by both the state and the local health departments, with each being responsible for administering a distinct set of programs. This is referred to as a hybrid system of administration and services.

Let's briefly review the structure of public health in Georgia.

The state public health agency, or Department of Public Health, is led by the health commissioner who is a medical doctor appointed by the state governor. The commissioner and staff at the Department of Public Health serve to develop and implement statewide public health policy; to operate several statewide programs such as disease surveillance and vital records; and to establish standards and regulations that protect the public's health, such as health screenings in public schools and restaurant inspections.

Each of the 159 counties in the state of Georgia has a health department. These counties are organized into 18 health districts. A district health director, who is a physician, serves as the chief executive officer of the district and the county health departments within it. The district health director serves as the bridge between the state public health agency and the local health departments.

For Georgia, it has been found that organizing into health districts allows the county health departments to share a common chief executive officer and a central administration staff, thus conserving resources and increasing efficiency.

Every county health department is governed by a county board of health comprised of elected and appointed community representatives under the supervision of the district health director. The primary responsibilities of the county board of health are to assess the needs of the community, provide policy guidance, and exercise general oversight of the health departments.

Georgia's public health responsibilities, therefore, are shared by the state Department of Public Health, the district health directors, the county health departments, and the county boards of health, who all work together to improve the health of all Georgians.

Who serves on the county board of health?

To better understand the roles and responsibilities of the county boards of health, let's first take a look at how the county boards of health are structured and who serves on them.

Georgia state law mandates that each county board of health must have seven members with a very specific set of requirements:

The county's chief executive officer holds the first position. A designee who holds elected office in the county's governing authority may serve instead.

Position 2 is held by a licensed physician who is actively practicing medicine in the county. If the county has fewer than 4 physicians, or if there are no physicians willing to serve on the board, a licensed nurse, dentist or other person who is familiar with medical services in the county may be appointed instead.

A community member who is a consumer, or a consumer advocate of health services and not a health care provider, fills the third position.

The fourth position is also a health services consumer but more specifically represents the needy, underprivileged, or elderly population in the county.

The school superintendent of the county, or a designated employee of the school system, serves as the fifth member of the board.

Position 6 is held by the chief executive officer of the governing authority of the largest municipality in the county such as a mayor.

Lastly, the seventh member is a licensed nurse or an additional health consumer who is specifically interested in promoting public health.

The district health director in each of the eighteen health districts in Georgia serves as the chief executive officer of each county board of health in his or her health district.

Together, this group of individuals represents the population of the county with each person bringing a unique perspective on the health of the community.

Management and Operations of the County Board of Health

Now let's review how the board of health is required to operate according to the law in Georgia.

The county board of health is mandated by state law to establish and adopt its own by-laws and to conduct meetings at least once a quarter. Beyond this the law does not dictate how a county board of health should organize itself or conduct business.

Although each board is required by law to meet at least once a quarter some choose to meet more frequently. Typically boards choose to elect a chair, vice-chair, and a secretary and they often choose to conduct meetings using Roberts Rules of Order. These practices are left to the individual board of health by-laws and/or membership discretion.

According to state, law board of health meetings must be open to the public and are subject to the Open Meetings Act of 2012. The date, time, and place that the meetings are held must be announced to the public at least one week in advance along with the meeting agenda. Meeting announcements should be posted on the board of health's or health department's website if they have one, as well as at the location where meetings are usually held. There should be no closed sessions unless there has been legal advice to the contrary.

Minutes of the meetings must be posted publicly within two days of the meeting time. As with meeting announcements, minutes are posted on the board of health's or health department's website if they have one, as well as at the location where meetings are usually held. Additionally, members of the public are allowed to film or record the meeting if they wish to do so.

Records pertaining to county board of health business must be provided to any person requesting them within 3 days of the request in accordance with the Open Records Act of 2012. If this is not possible, a written explanation must be given to the person requesting the records stating when the documents will be made available. As with the Open Meetings Act, there are exceptions to the Open Records Act, but requests to disclose a document should not be refused except upon legal advice.

Functions of the County Board of Health

By law, the county board of health has several key functions. First, the board of health has an important role pertaining to the budget for the local health department. The district health director submits a yearly budget for operations which must be voted upon by the board of health, and subsequently presented to the county commission for funding.

An effective board of health will work closely with the district health director to learn about health needs in the community. The board of health will then help to secure funds for programs to address identified gaps in services by advocating for them to the county commission or other funding sources.

A second key function of the county board of health is to vote on the Department of Public Health commissioner's recommendation for filling the position of the district health director. The district health director is a state employee but the county boards of health in the district must approve his or her appointment. Additionally, board of health members may be asked to serve on search and/or interview committees for candidates of this position.

Thirdly, the board of health, along with the county commission, is tasked to vote on any changes to the boundaries of their health district proposed by the state Department of Public Health.

Lastly, the board may also adopt public health rules and regulations, provided they are not in conflict with those of the Department of Public Health.

Although not required by law, board of health members play a vital role as the eyes and ears of the community. As such, they can provide insight and policy guidance to the district health director and the health department that can be used to continuously improve their capacity to meet the unique health needs of their community.

A good working relationship with the district health director is of key importance in fulfilling the roles and responsibilities of the county board of health. The district health director can advise the board in all aspects of the programs and services offered by the health department, as well as the needs of the population being served.

It is important to understand that the district health director reports to both the state commissioner of public health and to each county board of health in his or her district. Remember also that many districts have multiple county boards of health, which further increases the number of entities to whom the district health director reports. Answering to several different bosses is very difficult indeed and it is therefore very important that the day-to-day operations of the health department be left to the district health director. Rather, it is the board of health's duty to partner with the district health director on policy guidance, agency direction and planning issues.

The Ethical Obligations of Board of Health Members

There are certain ethical obligations that come with serving on the board of health, many of which are common to all who serve in the government.

Board of health members must take an oath of office upon being appointed to the board. After the oath is taken, board members are considered officers of the county government and as such have ethical obligations and responsibilities.

One important ethical obligation is for a board member to excuse himself or herself from any action or discussion of a particular matter if they have any financial interest, direct or indirect, in that matter.

For example, if a board member is an owner, part owner, or has a family member who owns a local restaurant, he or she should not participate in any discussions about that business, such as an inspection failure. Another example is if a business contributes to the political campaign of a board member, then that board member should abstain from any decision-making regarding that business entity. If the member is unsure whether a conflict of interest exists, he or she should seek the help and advice of the district health director, and if needed, seek legal advice.

It is of utmost importance to maintain the public's trust by being sure there is no perception of personal gain from official actions.

Other ethical obligations to note include upholding the Constitution, laws, and regulations of the United States and the State of Georgia. Special favors should not be granted nor should gifts be accepted, as these might be perceived as payment for influence. If corruption or mishandling of funds is discovered, it should be exposed through the proper channels.

Even decisions regarding resource allocations for public health programs and services can be seen as an ethical dilemma for a board of health as they grapple with funding needed for programs. If programs target particular population groups, other groups in the community may perceive the intent as unfair or as favoritism. So it is important for boards to ensure that resources are being allocated based on evidence-based practices, when available.

Board of health members may have access to confidential information, such as medical records, related to their position on the board. This information should be closely guarded and not shared with anyone unless it is necessary for legal purposes. Confidential information should also not be used for the personal gain of any members.

It cannot be overemphasized that the public's trust is of utmost importance in being an effective board of health. When the public trusts the health department as a whole, it is far easier to implement health promotion and disease prevention programs than when there is distrust. The leadership that the board can provide in gaining and maintaining the public trust is an important role for the local board of health.

In closing, the county board of health plays a critical role in the public health system in Georgia. Most importantly, cooperation, communication, trust, and respect at all levels of the public health system are essential to meeting the goal of a healthy community.

Discussion Questions

Consider the following questions:

1. What are the things that public health does well in your community?
2. What are the challenges of serving the public health needs of your community?
3. What community assets, stakeholders and organizations (public health, health care, and other community organizations) could be engaged to help support the work of public health?

Resources for Boards of Health

Leaders within your community, including the district health director, may have further insight into these issues. In addition, for more information on the roles and responsibilities of county board of health members, review:

- Georgia Department of Public Health: A Guide to Serving on the County Board of Health
- Georgia Public Health Association: Boards of Health Training Videos (<http://www.gapha.org/board-of-health-training-videos/>)
- National Association of Local Boards of Health (<http://www.nalboh.org/index.html>)

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