

CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH
MEETING OF THE BOARD OF HEALTH

Thursday, February 13, 2025

The Philadelphia Board of Health held a public meeting on Thursday, February 13, 2025. The meeting was held virtually using the Zoom platform to facilitate access by the public via computer or other device and toll-free phone number.

Board Members Present

Dr. Palak Raval-Nelson, Dr. Usama Bilal, Dr. Ana Diez-Roux, Dr. Marla Gold, Dr. Jennifer Ibrahim, Dr. Tyra Bryant-Stephens

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Health Commissioner and Board President Palak Raval-Nelson, PhD, MPH began the meeting by introducing herself as the new Health Commissioner. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted her past work with the Board during her tenure with the Health Department and acknowledged she was humbled by her new role.

APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES FROM MEETING ON 2.13.2025

Dr. Raval-Nelson asked if the Board had reviewed the minutes from the public meeting on October 10, 2024. Dr. Raval-Nelson requested a motion to approve the minutes. Dr. Ibrahim moved and Dr. Gold seconded. The motion was approved unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT EXPLANATION

Mr. Ben Hartung of the Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) reviewed the public comment process and provided notice that this meeting is being recorded and will be posted publicly on the department's YouTube channel.

PRESENTATION BY DR. RAVAL-NELSON

Dr. Raval-Nelson explained that her presentation will address the Department of Public Health's priorities, decision-making processes, the mayor's vision for the city, and her leadership style. Dr. Raval-Nelson read the department's mission statement. She noted that health is essential to human rights and that public health touches everyone's life every day. Dr. Raval-Nelson listed the programmatic divisions of the department. Each division has their own missions which are aligned with the overall mission of the department. Dr. Raval-Nelson listed the department's administrative divisions. Dr. Raval-Nelson highlighted the new health centers that have been approved for development and the goal of creating high-quality facilities.

Dr. Raval-Nelson reviewed the top causes of mortality in Philadelphia. There are two key mortality metrics: the number of total deaths and by the “years of potential life lost” (YPLL). Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the mayor wants Philadelphians to thrive, not just survive. Philadelphians need high quality food, green spaces, housing security, and healthcare. The top causes of death in Philadelphia are heart disease and cancer. The top causes of YPLL are accidental overdoses, homicide, and heart disease.

Dr. Raval-Nelson reviewed the department’s programmatic priorities. The department is working to ensure access to comprehensive primary care by addressing the longstanding lack of access in the lower northeast by building 2 new city health centers at the Frankford Transportation Center and at the Friends Hospital Campus. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted she is an environmental scientist and that the department works to improve the health of Philadelphia’s children through an environmental health approach. Dr. Raval-Nelson is a proponent of having spaces where children feel safe and have clean indoor spaces and air. Addressing maternal mortality and helping moms and families stay healthy is a department priority. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the tobacco industry has devised new ways to addict people at younger ages. Both education and enforcement must be used to address smoking rates. Dr. Raval-Nelson also noted the following priorities: collaborating across city departments to take a public health approach to gun violence, decreasing overdose deaths (the majority of which now involve a stimulant usually with an opioid), continuing to reduce smoking rates across the city (a major modifiable risk factor for heart disease and asthma), and incorporating lessons learned from COVID-19 to develop equity-focused emergency response.

Dr. Raval-Nelson noted demographic changes in the city. There has been growth in minority community populations in certain areas of the city and changes in where people are living in poverty. She highlighted the lower northeast as an area that has seen increases in people living in poverty. Dr. Raval-Nelson discussed two maps that showed the percentage of people unemployed by census tract and the number of nonfatal and fatal shootings by census tract. She noted a correlation between the maps and the need to partner with other city agencies to address this issue. Dr. Raval-Nelson reviewed a map that showed primary care access in Philadelphia, which showed the need to address the lack of access in the northeast. At Health Center 10 in the northeast, the current average wait time for an appointment for an adult is one year and for a child it is 6 months. Dr. Raval-Nelson called this unacceptable. To address this issue, the city has been working for years to make the two additional health centers now planned for development in the northeast a reality. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that 95% of Philadelphians served by city Health Centers are people of color. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the department needs to provide high standards of care at the city health centers.

Dr. Raval-Nelson discussed the issues of asthma and lead exposure. Asthma affects black and brown communities disproportionately. When an asthma attack occurs, not only does a child miss school, but parents miss work. Both learning and income are negatively affected. Dr. Raval-Nelson showed statistics for lifetime lead exposure by age 3 from 2011-2022 and said that no child should be lead poisoned. The battle against lead exposure has been decades long. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that, since 2020, a city ordinance requires all rental properties to have a lead-free certificate. Impacts from that law have been seen. The Division of Environmental Health Services (EHS) performs risk assessments and remediations when children have been

lead poisoned. The department has received \$7 million dollars for lead remediation, which is one more step towards making homes and residential spaces as lead free as possible.

Dr. Raval-Nelson discussed the newly proposed city health centers. The Frankford Transportation Center site will be able to see 16,000 patient per year. There will be a grocery store next door to incorporate a holistic approach to health. The Friends' Hospital campus health center will be able to see 30,000 patients a year. Both sites have City Council and community support, although there was some opposition. The health centers will help meet the care gap in the northeast. The health centers' revenue will pay for their operation.

Dr. Raval-Nelson addressed the department's decision-making process. It is informed by surveillance data, the community health improvement plan, strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (SWOC) analysis from community partners, and all staff surveys. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the "boots on the ground" staff can provide the best indicators of where we can improve operations. The department looks at the major causes of years of potential life lost in Philadelphia, the public health problems that are decreasing our ability to thrive as a city, and the determinants of health. The department then asks how we can impact these areas and how we can do our work more effectively. Dr. Raval-Nelson gave an example of identifying ways to coordinate more services, such as a lead and healthy homes team coordinating with a team that addresses maternal, child, and family health to make the department's work more efficient.

Dr. Raval-Nelson discussed a "health impact pyramid" that helps drive decision making and noted that solving socioeconomic determinants would help solve public health issues. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the mayor and the Commerce Department are working to improve access to economic opportunities. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the department can also work to address socioeconomic factors. Dr. Raval-Nelson provided examples of theories of change in the "health impact pyramid" For public health, the "changing the context" level includes fluoridation, iodization, smoke-free laws, and tobacco taxes. "Long-standing pro-active interventions" includes immunizations, tobacco cessation treatment and colonoscopy. "Clinical interventions" includes prescriptions for high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. "Counseling and education" include convincing people to eat healthy and to be physically active. Dr. Raval-Nelson next explained the connection between equity and public health, which involves looking at the interplay between the individual, the society, and the environment.

Dr. Raval-Nelson explained the "three pillars" of her leadership style, which she noted she has discussed with department staff. "Integrity" means being transparent and honest. For example, acknowledging if you don't know an answer and acknowledging that there is a whole team of experts in the department to support our work. "Commitment" acknowledges that public health work can be hard and if you are not committed, then keeping going can be challenging. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that she has yet to meet a more committed group than those working at the department. "Accountability" means staff being accountable to each other and the Philadelphians we serve.

Dr. Raval-Nelson reviewed Environmental Justice and Children's Health Strategies. Asthma affects about 1 out of 5 children in Philadelphia and is a major cause of missing school. In 2022, 11% of 3-year-olds ever had a lead level of 3.5 mcg/dL or more and 2% had ever had a level of

10 mcg/dL or more. No amount of lead is safe. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that indoor and outdoor air quality affects asthma and highlighted the recent impacts on air quality from the wildfires in Canada last summer. The department has established the Air Management Regulation (AMR)VI regulation on Hazardous Air Pollutants through the Air Pollution Control Board. This regulation requires Title V permit holders have to have mitigation strategies for cancer causing chemicals. The department is also working on multi-stakeholder planning process for asthma and tobacco use, including tobacco use during the postpartum period. As previously mentioned, the department provides Lead and Healthy Homes services and the lead certification law is bringing down lead poisoning levels. The department has decreased the threshold for home services to 3.5 mcg/dL. The department has received over 100,000 lead certifications, so it is very unlikely that children living in those spaces will develop lead poisoning.

Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the department takes a policy, systems and environmental health approach to non-communicable diseases, which cause about 70% of deaths. The top underlying cause of death in the city is tobacco use, at about 3,700 deaths per year. The Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention (CDIP) and Environmental Health Services (EHS) work on outreach, education and enforcement for tobacco retailers. This work includes issuing youth sales tickets, taking cases to court, and collaborating with the Department of Licenses and Inspections to cease operations for repeat violators of tobacco youth sales laws.

The department works with other city departments and agencies to identify opportunities to make it easier and more attractive to be active in city neighborhoods. The department works with other city departments and agencies to decrease the number of city residents without access to running water. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that water is a basic human right and highlighted department collaboration with Philly Counts Community Health Workers to reach out to those threatened with shutoffs to connect them with assistance programs.

Dr. Raval-Nelson stated she is a proponent of collaboration. One of the department's first tasks is building collaboration between divisions in the department to align with the department's mission and the city's vision. Some recent examples provided by Dr. Raval-Nelson were the department's response to the recent Code Blue event and the plane crash response. Air Management Services responded to the plane crash site to monitor air quality concerns for residents. The Facilities Management division made sure that Health Center 10 on Cottman Avenue was not impacted. The Medical Examiner's Office also responded. The department collaborates with other city departments to achieve the support needed to carry out the department and city's mission and vision. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted two examples. One, a forthcoming rodent survey to address a problem that needs a comprehensive approach. The department is implementing a CDC process that involves the Streets Department, Water Department, and Councilmanic Districts working collaboratively to help empower people to protect their homes by properly storing trash, while also baiting and treating. The second example was the department's response to the chemical spill at Bartram Garden's. The department was involved with the remediation plan for the chemical company and coordinating with the Water Department, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, and the Pennsylvania Department of Health to provide guidance and facilitate community conversation.

Dr. Raval-Nelson described the relationship between the department and the Board of Health as a partnership. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that she had personally experienced the impact of the regulations passed by the Board of Health throughout the decades of her career with the department. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that she would meet with the Board to discuss the public health issues impacting Philadelphians and the tools to make meaningful impact and change. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that “the Board of Health approves and promotes the health regulations for the Department of Public Health.” These regulations establish standards to control public health hazards and protect the health of Philadelphians. Dr. Raval-Nelson cited the example of regulations passed in 2012 regarding outdoor feeding, so that people can have a healthy, dignified experience even if they can’t afford food. One in three children in Philadelphia go to bed hungry and Dr. Raval-Nelson does not want that. The outdoor feeding regulations have been enforced since 2012 through an application process, compliance monitoring, and offered trainings to make sure everyone gets safe and healthy food. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated her wish that the department and Board continue to work together to pass robust regulations. The department leads with education but still needs regulations to make changes to public health.

Dr. Raval-Nelson concluded her presentation by stating she looked forward to working with the Board and by opening the floor for questions.

QUESTION FROM MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF HEALTH

Dr. Gold offered congratulations and her excitement for Dr. Raval-Nelson’s appointment and thanked her for the presentation. Dr. Gold named the federal administration as one of the greatest threats to public health, in about every single way. Dr. Gold noted that prior to COVID-19 the federal government worked with city partners on planning, but there has been no federal partnership for some time. Dr. Gold noted that H5N1, or bird flu, is around the bend. Dr. Gold asked how confident Dr. Raval-Nelson is with the state of local public health should the federal government, particularly CDC, not respond. Dr. Gold asked if the city is actively meeting to strategize, given the current landscape and fiscal constraints. Dr. Raval-Nelson recognized the presence of the department’s division directors at the meeting to aid a unified departmental approach. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that she oversaw EHS during the pandemic, which was the division enforcing COVID-19 related rules, and that it was challenging a task. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that the department is doing work to fortify itself. Dr. Raval-Nelson acknowledged the work of the Mayor’s Office, the Managing Director’s Office, and Deputy Managing Director for Health and Human Services Crystal Yates-Gale, and her Chief of Staff Martese Coker-Clark. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that there are meetings with leadership and within the department to gather intel and “steady the ship” considering federal developments. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted the leadership of Mayor Parker, who has been hosting planning meetings to make sure the city is fortified. Dr. Raval-Nelson said the town hall in response to the plane crash stands out because it demonstrated that the response ensured that the most vulnerable are taken care of. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that leaders stayed at the town hall meeting until every single person at the 300-person-plus town hall got the help they needed. Dr. Raval-Nelson learned from that town hall about how different levels of the political structure responded to help, including elected representatives, the Governor’s Office, and the PA DEP director, who was there to address environmental concerns.

Dr. Gold suggested that the department should add explicit language to its mission statement about commitment to public health science and data in the leadership meetings. Dr. Gold stated that this commitment should be a public fact in the face of these unbelievable times because “data is everything to combat misinformation.” Dr. Raval-Nelson said that the board members are the subject matter experts that the department works with to make guardrails to help us get through this period.

Dr. Diez-Roux thanked Dr. Raval-Nelson for her presentation. She suggested that Dr. Raval-Nelson identify her top priorities as Health Commissioner and what is most important to her during her leadership. Dr. Diez-Roux offered to help provide thoughts on potential priorities. Dr. Diez-Roux hoped to hear more about the department’s plan for health equity, especially beyond access to healthcare and the health centers. Dr. Diez-Roux asked about the department’s priority areas of focus over the next few years to reduce inequity in the city. Dr. Diez-Roux stated that climate is also on her mind, including beyond disaster response. She asked what the city can do to prepare and address the climate crisis and its health impacts. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted her environmental health background and how it informs her views on environmental justice. Dr. Raval-Nelson cited working with the Department of Prisons to have mechanical cooling during heat emergencies. Dr. Raval-Nelson described health equity as basic human rights through a health lens. Dr. Raval-Nelson mentioned working on equitable workspaces for staff and discussing equity with other city leaders. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted the department is transitioning to electric cars in its fleet, which will positively impact air quality and health. Dr. Raval-Nelson said she will work on clarifying her vision and looks forward to gaining insight from board members as her vision develops.

Dr. Ibrahim expressed appreciation for Dr. Raval-Nelson’s remarks. Dr. Ibrahim asked Dr. Raval-Nelson for re-commitment to collaboration with the members of the Board of Health because there has been an extended period when they have been ready and willing to help without engagement. Dr. Ibrahim also asked about the department’s plan for communication to the public about important issues. Dr. Ibrahim noted that the CDC no longer provides as much information to the public. Dr. Ibrahim asked Dr. Raval-Nelson to speak to the department’s approach to communicating prevention strategies (for instance for bird flu), promoting awareness of major issues, and recommending actions the public can take. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the COVID-19 pandemic taught us the importance of public communication that is direct, frequent, and succinct. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the department’s preparedness group within the Division of Disease Control and the department’s Communications Director are working to make sure existing communication networks are still robust and in place, so that the public has a trusted website or other source of information from the city. Dr. Raval-Nelson said the department wants to fortify those resources even more.

Dr. Bryant-Stephens asked about collaboration between city groups related to Mayor Parker’s commitment to 30,000 housing units. Dr. Bryant-Stephens noted that healthy housing is critical to preventing lead poisoning. Dr. Bryant-Stephens asked how the department is working to make sure the housing created by the plan is healthy housing. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted her work since 2011 with Dr. Bryant-Stephens on healthy housing. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the mayor is connecting the department with partners in the housing work, such as PIDC, and that the department will continue to make connections to the housing plan partners so that everyone is

aware of the department's resources. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted the department's existing connection with the Basic Systems Repair Program (BSRP) for remediation work. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted her ongoing relationship the Commissioner of License and Inspections. The department is not currently at a place to roll out initiatives publicly, but Dr. Raval-Nelson said she continues to have conversations. Dr. Bryant-Stephens emphasized that the mayor's plan presents an opportunity to do something different and great about housing opportunity.

Dr. Bryant-Stephens stated she is working on a neighborhood specific project that brought to her attention the lack of brick-and-mortar markets that sell fresh produce. Dr. Bryant-Stephens stated that "food is health" and wondered if anyone in the department is looking at food deserts or working with businesses to get more healthy foods into neighborhoods. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted that the Division of Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention (CDIP) and Division of Environmental Health Services look at farmers' markets together to both ensure access and food safety. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that she would follow up with the division directors, Dr. Chandriani and Dawn Kieseewetter, after this call. Dr. Bryant-Stephens wondered if it would be helpful for the department to issue a public statement on its commitment to the fight for health equity given the political landscape. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the Mayor's Office and Law Department are working on those issues and that the Communications Director, Jim Garrow, is working on the department's plan.

A public commenter stated that there are methods for addressing the lack of food access. They noted Meals on Wheels and community gardens can address hunger. The commenter strongly believes that Philadelphia should have community gardens in each neighborhood for food access.

Dr. Gold asked about the scheduling plan for future meetings. Dr. Raval-Nelson said her understanding is that the Board meets quarterly, with more frequent meetings, as needed. Dr. Raval-Nelson stated that the Air Pollution Control Board also meets regularly because they want to address mobile sources. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that Ben Hartung and Jim Garrow will follow up with the Board Members with a list of meetings for the rest of the year. Dr. Gold asked how to reach out to the department in between the quarterly meetings. Dr. Raval-Nelson said that Board Members could reach out to her directly via email. Dr. Raval-Nelson noted the need to follow the Sunshine Act's requirements for communications and said she would be open to more frequent meetings if needed.

ADJOURNMENT

Dr. Raval-Nelson adjourned the meeting at 7:33 p.m.