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State of Illinois Releases COVID-19 After-Action Report & Playbook as Guide for Future Public Health Emergencies

Pritzker Administration Provides Guide to Future Administrations on Navigating Public Health Crises

CHICAGO – On the eve of the anniversary marking the end of the Public Health Emergency (PHE) declarations put in place at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of Illinois released a [playbook detailing measures](#) the state should take to prepare for future public health emergencies as well as recommendations for future administrations that may have to navigate public health crises.

“Following a once-in-a-century event like the COVID-19 pandemic it is critical that we take the time to thoroughly study how our state responded to the emergency and seek to learn lessons that will put us in a stronger position the next time such an all-of-government response is required,” **said Governor JB Pritzker.**

The playbook was produced through a review of the impact of COVID-19 on Illinois residents, with a focus on health and human services outcomes; compiling lessons learned during the pandemic; and developing forward-looking recommendations to improve preparedness for future public health emergencies and non-emergency state operations.

“Reimagining public health in Illinois to best prepare for future public health emergencies requires careful evaluation and implementation of lessons learned,” **said IDPH Director Dr. Sameer Vohra.** “Under Governor Pritzker’s leadership, IDPH has been committed to recovering and growing our public health systems in the wake of the COVID-19 public health emergency. We are partnering with the General Assembly and other state agencies to build a unified vision for health focused on creating an accessible, coordinated, and equitable public health system for all Illinois residents.”

The review produced a 13-page [after-action report](#) and a 33-page playbook intended to guide an all-of-government response to potential future public health emergencies.

The playbook lays out three phases of any response: establishing the response, activating the response and delivering the response. Under those headings, 14 steps the state should take are

identified as it mobilizes state agencies, other branches of government, health system partners, and outside experts and stakeholders to deliver a coordinated disaster response.

The after-action report found that the strengths of the state's response included: strong central leadership at the top, including setting out a clear vision and priorities; a data-driven approach; a focus on equity and prioritizing underserved communities in allocating resources; effective use of community relationships and public private partnerships; and effective use of executive orders that speeded up the deliver of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other resources.

The report noted that the focus on equity contributed to achieving better rates of vaccine uptake for non-white Illinoisans than non-white residents in all but one peer states.

While the report indicated that Illinois demonstrated clear strengths in the COVID-19 response, it also identified lessons learned that can improve future responses to infectious disease public health emergencies.

The key challenges that Illinois state agencies experienced at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic were: limited planning for a major infectious disease emergency that required a whole-of-government response; limitations on health and operational data infrastructure and capabilities; lack of real-time data needed to measure and respond to health equity needs and broader health impacts; variations in the effectiveness of community engagement; and depletion of the public health workforce due to attrition and a slow hiring process.

The report recommended action in three key areas to improve future pandemic response – all of which are areas that IDPH has already taken steps to upgrade its capabilities:

1. Improve preparedness: Refine pandemic response plans, establish a coordinated response command structure, and establish a whole-of-government training cadence to improve readiness for the next infectious disease emergency.
2. Modernize systems: Invest in the technology and data systems, cross-agency capabilities and infrastructure, and hiring processes and talent development systems required to improve public health effectiveness and build health resilience and equity in advance of the next emergency.
3. Invest in communities and continue building public trust: Enhance investment in Local Health Departments and community-based organizations that provide public health services, supported by clear accountability mechanisms and close engagement with IDPH, to improve community emergency response capabilities and enhance equity, and build the community and digital channels of communication required to reach diverse communities and fight misinformation.

Over the past year, IDPH, along with its state partners, have already begun implementing these measures and others to address these critical COVID-19 lessons. A sample of specific initiatives include:

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- Improve Preparedness:
 - Updated our emergency response plans to better address infectious disease outbreaks.
 - Enhanced planning drills to improve state, local, and healthcare partners preparedness.
 - Created a new Medical Services section with an Infectious Disease Medical Advisor and regional infection preventionists to rapidly deploy healthcare personnel to address outbreaks.
- Modernize Systems:
 - Invested federal public health infrastructure to enhance and grow IDPH and local health department workforce initiatives.
 - Invested federal and state funding to modernize data systems, with specific emphasis on building a new Illinois Disease Surveillance System and Long-Term Care System
 - Created a Health Informatics Section to better use predictive analytics and rapidly evolving artificial intelligence to improve data analysis.
- Invest in Communities and Build Trust:
 - First-ever IDPH Communications line was created in FY24 budget to expand public health messaging to be culturally inclusive, evidence-based, and engaging.
 - Developing a strategy to create health equity zones throughout Illinois that will empower communities to create community-led and community-built solutions.
 - Shifting IDPH's efforts from COVID to community – enhancing community engagement efforts and growing partnerships to address and uplift the full spectrum of health challenges necessary to build a healthier Illinois.

Governor Pritzker included an additional \$28 million in funding in his Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Proposal to carry out the following initiatives the following initiatives that are connected to preparing for any future public health emergencies:

- Modernizing public health data systems to better prevent disease outbreaks and protect our most vulnerable residents. This includes a new Illinois Disease Surveillance System, an improved iQuery system, and a modernized system for Long-Term Care surveillance.
- Growing the public health workforce, including strengthening the ranks of Long Term Care surveyors.
- Implementing department-wide quality improvement measures to prepare for the next public health emergency.
- Enhancing public health communication to build trust and combat disinformation.

Last May 11, Governor Pritzker declared ["Illinois Public Health & Health Care Hero Day"](#) on the day the COVID-related Public Health Emergency (PHE) declarations expired.

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