

# History of Public Health in Lorain County, Ohio and summary

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

## **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 LCGHD. Using this subsidy, the district hired two nurses, one sanitarian, and one clerk.

### **1951 – Passage of the Wheeler Act (R.C. 2709.29)**

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 LCGHD 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 now 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 LCGHD moved to larger offices in Oberlin, at 220 W. Lorain Street, Oberlin.

### **1966 – Medicare Takes Effect**

After the Medicare Act was signed in 1965, it went into effect, ensuring all Lorain County (and 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 – LCGHD Moves to Murray Ridge Rd., Elyria**

In 1967, the LCGHD 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 R.C. 2709.29**

An amendment to R.C. 2709.29 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 exceptional cases.

## **1975 – Creation of Adult Clinics**

After receiving a grant from the Western Reserve Office on Aging, the LCGHD 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 LCGHD received a block grant to hire more health educators. Until this time, the health district had only had one health educator 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 LCGHD 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, many of the nurses were unable to stay on at the LCGHD. Some on went 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). LCGHD 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 districts of Elyria and Lorain officially merged with the Lorain County General Health District. 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.

### **Health Commissioners, general health district**

- March 20, 1920 – October 1, 1925: Dr. W. A. McIntosh
- October 1, 1925 – May 31, 1927: Dr. I. C. Riggin
- 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 – Present: David Covell, MPH, RS