

BOARD OF HEALTH
<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/86147100429>
January 15, 2026 Minutes

BOH Members Present: Dr. Joanne Levin; Dr. Suzanne Smith; Dr. Cynthia Suopis

BOH Members Absent: Janet Grant, MSPH

Staff: Merridith O’Leary, Commissioner; Kelly Constantine, BOH Clerk; Amy Hutchins, Dir Environmental Health, Em Moulton, PHN

Guests: Heather Warner; Ken Elstein, Belchertown BOH

The meeting was conducted on Zoom and recorded.

Public Comment Session: Dr. Levin announced that public comments would be limited to two minutes per person and the meeting is being recorded. One member of the public made comments.

I. Meeting opened January 15, 2026 at 5:36 pm by Dr. Levin.

Motion: Motion made to open the meeting by Dr. Smith, seconded by Dr. Suopis. All in favor (3-0).

II. Public Health Nurse Update: Em Moulton, PHN, provided an update on the public health nursing activities related to vaccination clinics, respiratory illness trends, and norovirus surveillance. The team held flu and COVID clinics at 34 sites with 1,665 total vaccine doses given. In addition, there were 91 doses given to homebound individuals throughout our shared service agreement area. Outreach focused on populations at high risk, adults 65+, homebound and caregivers, and those facing barriers to vaccine access, especially in rural community and pharmacy deserts. Massachusetts has had four pediatric deaths due to the flu and all four patients were unvaccinated. Respiratory illness emergency room visits have been high, while low for RSV and COVID. The COVID wastewater level was high with a spike during the holiday season, and it is now trending down. As of December 1, 2025, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health recommends the routine investigation of norovirus disease events for two age groups, children under 12 and adults 80 years and over.

III. Old Business:

➤ **Continued conversation about Nicotine Free Generation** – Commissioner O’Leary provided a background and a refresher on Nicotine-Free Generation (NFG). NFG is a birth date-based policy that gradually prohibits the sale of all nicotine products, including cigarettes, e-cigarettes, vapes, smokeless tobacco and oral nicotine pouches, to individuals born on or after a specified year. Unlike older tobacco-only laws, NFG is nicotine-inclusive, addressing new products like e-cigarettes and oral nicotine pouches that appeal to youth. Individuals who are not currently able to buy nicotine products will never be able to purchase them, even as adults.

There are currently 21 communities in Massachusetts that have passed NFG. When Brookline's policy was challenged in court, opponents argued the law was preempted by state tobacco laws, and violated constitutional provisions. In March of 2024, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court unanimously upheld the policy finding that NFG regulations was a valid exercise of local public health authority and did not violate equal protection under the state constitution. Therefore, paving a clear path for other communities to adapt similar policies with confidence that they can withstand judicial scrutiny.

Ken Elstein, of the Belchertown Board of Health, described Belchertown’s experience implementing NFG, which the town adopted in December 2024 and they have now completed one year of implementation. Mr. Elstein characterized the rollout as seamless, affecting a limited number of merchants and individuals. He reported minimal public pushback and shared that some retailers have found compliance easier because the policy relies on checking a birth year rather

than calculating age. Mr. Elstein reported that the Health Director went around to all the stores and made sure that they all understood the rules. Mr. Elstein reported that Belchertown has conducted compliance checks and eight out of ten retailers passed the compliance checks, while two failed and were subject to fines, which are currently under appeal.

Heather Warner stated that one of the things that impressed her about NFG is that as nicotine use rates by young people continues to go down, the industry keeps coming up with new, innovative ways to attract young people. When we saw that cigarette use went down almost to a negligible use amount, Juul came out and we had an incredible epidemic of youth use and youth addiction, which we are still on the tail end of and dealing with. Ms. Warner stated that vapes are still the number one product being used, but now there is another new product, nicotine pouches. Ms. Warner indicated that she does have some of the county data that SPIFFY Coalition (Strategic Planning Initiative for Families and Youth) collected showing some of the use rates for smoking and for vaping. She would be happy to send the links and her letter to the board. She went on to describe these products. One of the things that vaping and nicotine pouches have in common is that they use synthetic nicotine, so they are not even a tobacco product. One of the advantages for them when using synthetic nicotine is that they have designed it very specifically to enter the bloodstream very rapidly. In addition, the potency is so high that it addicts people quickly. The other thing about it is that there is no beginning or end, as with a cigarette where your lungs rest in between use, or your body recovers from the nicotine. However, with some of these products, it is continual.

The Board discussed scheduling a public forum in February regarding nicotine-free generation policies, with the March meeting discussing the findings, and then a hearing and a vote in April.

IV. New Business:

- **Discussion of State Cannabis Consumption Centers Regulation** – Commissioner O’Leary presented information about the new state regulation allowing on-site cannabis consumption at licensed establishments, effective January 2. While the Cannabis Control Commission has approved these regulations, social consumption licenses are not yet available, and municipalities must opt-in through either a ballot referendum or ordinance. She outlined three types of licenses that will be available, including supplemental licenses for existing dispensaries, hospitality licenses for standalone businesses, and event organizer licenses for temporary events. She noted public health safeguards, including restrictions on alcohol and tobacco, age verification requirements, and THC limits, while noting questions about how this regulation intersects with Northampton’s existing smoking ban.

V. Department Updates:

- **St John Emergency Shelter** – Commissioner O’Leary stated that the church has opened a new winter emergency shelter in the “Trinity Room”. The shelter opens when temperatures fall below 15 degrees Fahrenheit and is entirely volunteer-run. Volunteers received training from Tapestry and CSO. Access to the shelter is by DCC referral only and they serve as triage until 10:00PM. The shelter capacity is about 10 residents, there is no sobriety requirement, and pets are allowed.
- **Measles Tabletop Exercise** – Commissioner O’Leary reported attending a measles tabletop exercise at Smith College. The exercise reviewed response protocols for a realistic emergency scenario dealing with a potential measles case. Smith College has a very high measles vaccination rate and can rapidly verify student vaccination status through the Massachusetts Immunization Information System (MIIS), a significant improvement over processes used during a confirmed measles case in 2017. Isolation and quarantine planning was also discussed. The Commissioner also noted that the U.S. reported 2,242 confirmed measles cases across 45

jurisdictions in 2025, the highest level in over 30 years. Continued transmission could place the U.S. at risk of losing its measles elimination status in 2026.

- **Mini Grants** - The DHHS will be offering mini-grants funded by opioid settlement dollars to support community efforts that prevent opioid misuse, reduce overdose risk, expand access to treatment, and strengthen recovery supports. Grants will prioritize prevention and education, youth wellness, harm reduction initiatives such as naloxone distribution and peer outreach, treatment access including peer navigation and post-overdose follow-up, and recovery supports such as peer and family services, recovery groups, and job or housing assistance. An application is being developed and will be available online, with paper copies available upon request.

VI. Review Minutes

A. Meeting Minutes from December 18, 2025.

Motion: Approved as amended: Motion made by Dr. Suopis to accept the minutes as amended, seconded by Dr. Smith. All were in favor (3-0).

Meeting Closed: Motion to Close Meeting: Motion made to close the Board of Health meeting by Dr. Suopis, seconded by Dr. Smith. All in favor (3-0)

Meeting closed at 7:20 PM.

The next scheduled Board of Health Meeting: a poll of the Board will decide the next meeting
Kelly Constantine, BOH Clerk

BOARD OF HEALTH

Date: January 15, 2026

Hearing Room, Second Floor, City Hall, 210 Main Street

Meeting Document List

The following documents were available to the Board of Health during their scheduled meeting.

These documents are available for review at the:

Northampton Health Department, 212 Main Street, Northampton, MA 01060

- Meeting Agenda
- December 18, 2026 Minutes