History of the Kansas City Missouri Health Department 1866 – Present

In 1866, Dr. A. P. Languor was appointed the first City Physician, which marks the beginning of public health services in Kansas City. There were 37 individual City Physicians from 1866 to the current Director. In recent history, Dr. Richard Biery held the position from 1975 – 98 and was succeeded by the current Health Department Director, Rex Archer, M.D., M.P.H. The Health Department's history of protecting the public's health in Kansas City even predates the formation of the state Board of Health in 1883.

Kansas City experienced a population boom of over 600% in the decade of 1860-70. Protecting commerce that accompanied the expansion west and growing railroads was a top priority. In these early days, little was known about the cause and spread of contagious diseases such as smallpox, malaria, cholera, and typhoid. The City's chief concern was to isolate those afflicted as soon as possible in what was usually referred to as "pest houses". Then, as now, no one wanted a pest house in his or her neighborhood. At one point, serious consideration was given to erecting a pest house on an island in the Missouri River. Dr. A. P. Languor was instructed to take care of the sick poor who might apply to him; run the City hospital and pest houses; recommend legislation that would help safeguard the public health; and register births and deaths. The first City Hospital was built in 1869 at 22nd and McCoy Streets.

In 1880, the City by ordinance created the first Board of Health consisting of four ex-officio members and two other members elected by the council annually. The board had five broad areas of power: inspect foods and dairies, sanitation, prevent and control contagious diseases, collect vitals statistics and to administer the City Hospitals. A new brick hospital was built in 1884. This, along with two existing wooden frame buildings, served the City's hospital needs until 1895, when a second brick structure containing an amphitheater to accommodate medical students was built. Around 1899, the City erected a one-story brick building for the care of patients with tuberculosis (TB) and contagious diseases. In 1908, the City charter revised the composition of the board as a lay board serving without compensation and health officers were civil servants in accordance with provisions of the charter. The General Hospital was built on land donated by Colonel Thomas Swope that is now known as Hospital Hill. In 1910, motorized ambulance service began and a new TB hospital was built on City owned farm lands in the Leeds area.

In 1920, the City hired a milk expert to monitor Kansas City's milk supply. The result was a milk inspection ordinance that remained in effect until 1941 when the City adopted the United States Public Health Service Standard Milk Ordinance. The City started outpatient services in 1921. Twenty-one physicians and a social worker provided by the Women's City Club made up the first staff. The next year the hospital added three more social workers.

In 1925, the City adopted a new charter that abandoned the board system and placed the Health Department under the supervision of a single director, Dr. E.W. Cavaness, who was appointed by the City Manager. Six divisions were formed: Administration and Records, Inspection and Sanitation, Laboratories, Child Hygiene, Communicable Disease, and Hospitals.

In 1940, an Industrial Hygiene Section was started to counsel businesses on industrial health problems and to provide laboratory services. The City adopted the Public Health Services Standard Food Ordinance in 1944. That same year, the Health Department started a training program for food handlers. In 1946, the Health Department took over a dental health system run by the public school system. Rodent control was added to the Health Department duties in 1946. In 1949, swimming pool inspections and a fly eradication program were initiated.

During the 1960's the City contracted with community based private not-for-profit organizations for hospital administration and indigent in-patient medical care. The Health Department then put its emphasis on ambulatory services, well child clinics and communicable disease control. In the 1970's, the Health Department added family planning and prenatal clinics services.

From the late 1930's through the late 1990's Health Department services were scattered throughout various sites around Kansas City. Those sites included two floors in City Hall, renovated hospitals, renovated churches, storefronts, leased suites, and the basement of an old nurse's quarter near the original General Hospital. A considerable milestone was met when 25 years of planning to consolidate all Health Department operations was realized on May 16, 1997 with the opening and dedication of the "New Health Department Building" built on Hospital Hill. The state of the art facility includes beautiful origami sculptures "Offering Hat, Drinking Cup, and Illuminated Boat," by Buster Simpson and an inscription by the Greek Philosopher Herophilus, (300 BC) welcomes each visitor which states, "When health is absent: Wisdom cannot reveal itself, Art cannot become manifest, Strength cannot be exerted, Wealth becomes useless, and Reason is powerless". In six days the Health Department consolidated five different locations, two hundred employees, thirty different operational programs into one facility and was open to the public on the seventh day.

In the early 2000's, the Health Department withstood severe fiscal challenges while reaching major accomplishments. In 2002, the Health Department became one of the first twelve local public health departments in the nation to be recognized as models of public health emergency preparedness by the National Association of County & City Health Official (NACCHO) as part of Project Public Health Ready. In July 2004, the Health Department became the first local public health department in the nation to be awarded comprehensive level accreditation by meeting standards set by the Missouri Institute for Community Health (MICH) Voluntary Accreditation Program for Local Public Health Agencies. In April 2005, the Kansas City voters passed a 22 cent increase to the City's Health Levy, coming at a time when other governmental revenue sources such as Medicare and Medicaid were cutting back their financing levels. In 2005, the City established by ordinance a Health Commission charged to strengthen the public health infrastructure, improve access to care, and develop a community health plan. Also in that year, the Health Department's Director, Dr. Rex Archer, assumed the presidency of NACCHO, representing 2,800 local public health departments.

The Health Department began a significant drive in 2008, to improve and enhance outreach efforts in the community, focusing on health disparities and their impact on the health and wellness of our residents. The department joined with faith community and business partners to form Building a Healthier Heartland (BHH) to bring all facets of community leadership into the planning and discussion process pointed at improving health outcomes. Improvements can be

found in the new primary care clinic at 89th & Troost that now serves the southern part of the city, Active Living KC grant which provides physical activity and nutrition educational assistance in the Hickman Mills area, primary care clinic at N. Oak and Vivion, and school flu clinic project to improve outreach to our youth.

The history of the Health Department is long and varied. Today, the Health Department is actively engaged in active community health outreach, wellness, and prevention. The Health Department is uniquely positioned in multiple sectors to assess, assure and develop robust policy to protect and serve the residents and visitors of Kansas City, Missouri.

The Health Department was awarded five year national accreditation status by the Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) on August 20, 2013. Out of 3,000 existing local, state and tribal health departments, the department officially became ***only*** 1 of 19 departments to be recognized by PHAB as high-performing. PHAB is the independent organization that administers the national public health accreditation program. Their aim is to improve and protect the health of the public by advancing the quality and performance. Accreditation means the department places an emphasis on identifying performance improvement opportunities, improving management performance, and developing leadership. Additionally, accredited public health agencies must also demonstrate a process for ongoing evaluation and improvement of its business delivery systems as well as maintain accountability, transparency, and community engagement in developing effective public health policies.

Charter of Kansas City, Missouri

Adopted by the Electors August 8, 2006
Second Committee Substitute for Ordinance 050953
Committee Substitute for Ordinance 051253

Sec. 409. Health.

(a) ***Duties.*** There will exist a Health Department, under the supervision of a Director of Health, to perform the following duties:

(1) ***Regulation of the public health.***

(A) ***Enforce laws.*** Enforce all laws relating to public health, and may make rules and regulations for preserving and promoting the public health, provision of indigent health care; including taking all measures necessary to avoid, suppress or mitigate disease and relieve distress caused by disaster or acts of terrorism.

(B) ***Nuisance abatement.*** The Director of Health shall have power to cause any nuisance detrimental to health to be abated or removed. The cost of abatement may be assessed and collected as a special tax and be a lien on the property affected thereby, in the manner provided by ordinance.

(C) ***Entry into property.*** The Director of Health may enter all property necessary to enforce all laws relating to public health and for purposes of providing for the avoidance, suppression or mitigation of disease, and abatement of nuisances and other unhealthy conditions.

(2) ***Other assigned duties.*** Perform such other duties as may be prescribed by law.

(b) ***Appointment.*** The Director of Health shall be appointed by the City Manager and have special training and experience in public health work and be a graduate of a recognized school of public health.