

Media Questions Allegany Hope Community News on Facebook ACDOH Press Conference
December 7, 2021

1. Please provide an unedited list of questions submitted for this press briefing from the various media, including who asked them. Also, please provide any questions and the source of any members of the public or others who may have attempted to have their questions answered. This can be forwarded prior to the event via email to @AlleganyHopeWNY@outlook.com.

This has been completed per a F.O.I.L. request filed by Allegany Hope.

2. Allegany Hope has been asking what the county's short and long-term mitigation plans are for this virus for well over a year and primarily is given what could be termed Band Aid or patchwork approaches. At the state level, the Governor says she has a tiered plan to address the issue. Erie County and Monroe County Executives have laid out multi-tiered responses so people know what to expect if the situation doesn't improve. All we basically have heard from Allegany County in regard to any type of current and forward-thinking comprehensive plan is silence. Can you explain the rationale for this approach?

The Allegany County Department of Health (ACDOH) will continue to provide COVID vaccinations and testing to Allegany County residents. See www.alleganyco.com for the links to register for COVID vaccinations and testing. As we have seen from the beginning of this pandemic, plans change very rapidly and directions change very rapidly at the State and Federal levels. We have found that making plans that best suit our County and communities is the best common sense approach. Most of our plans that have been developed, revolved around PreK-12 schools and those plans were quickly shelved when mask mandates come into play or other protocols are rolled out. We would much rather work with the State and State Health Department to identify exit strategies that make the most sense for our County and our residents. We do not believe that empty threats of closures make any sense at this point of the pandemic.

3. The county executives in Erie and Monroe counties have declared States of Emergency with various levels of compliance, depending on whether COVID rates keep going higher. What are any short and long-term mitigation plans the health department is proposing, and implementing, for the county, both on its own authority and as recommendations to the county, itself? What is the status of same?

The Allegany County Department of Health will continue to provide COVID vaccinations and testing to Allegany County residents. See www.alleganyco.com for the links to register for COVID vaccinations and testing. [Governor Hochul Announces Major Action to Address Winter Surge and Prevent Business Disruption as COVID-19 Cases and Hospitalizations Rise Statewide \(ny.gov\)](#)

You have referenced Erie and Monroe Counties several times; we are Allegany County and we are different than most other Counties in the region and across the State based on demographics, media coverage, and our way of life. What works best in other Counties sometimes does not work best for our residents and our communities. We continue to choose positive rhetoric that

does not ostracize or push one agenda over another other than providing safe, health, and transparent information.

4. Last Wednesday, December 1, Public Health Director Shaw recommended to the county that it place a mask mandate in place, and asked county legislators to endorse some type of letter. What is the current status of that action, which can be taken immediately through a State of Emergency by the Chairman of the Board of Legislators? *See link below for state.*

How many legislators have signed the letter. *All of them, please see press announcements on County Website and Facebook.*

Allegany Hope has asked about similar mitigation plans at various times in the past and was only provided with patchwork items. Why has it taken so long to get to this point when the same threat occurred last year, Allegany Hope has been reporting for several weeks that it appears the county is starting this holiday season from a base of the high point of last year's wave, and the hospital has been over 50 percent COVID patients, as we understand it, since September?

[Governor Hochul Announces Major Action to Address Winter Surge and Prevent Business Disruption as COVID-19 Cases and Hospitalizations Rise Statewide \(ny.gov\)](#)

5. With Allegany County providing little substantive, repeated and “appealing” public interest information as to what has been happening with COVID for the past 20 months, other than what Allegany Hope has been able to dig out and associate to real life situations involving individuals and families, do you feel the county bears any responsibility for the situation it now finds itself in?

[Governor Hochul Announces Major Action to Address Winter Surge and Prevent Business Disruption as COVID-19 Cases and Hospitalizations Rise Statewide \(ny.gov\)](#) *The Allegany County Department of Health will continue to provide COVID vaccinations and testing to Allegany County residents. See www.alleganyco.com for the links to register for COVID vaccinations and testing.*

6. At last Wednesday's (December 1, 2021) Human Services Committee meeting of the Board of Legislators, the public health director talked about encouraging businesses to require masks within inside public spaces. Since this doesn't require approval by county government, what is the status of this initiative and how will it proceed?

[Governor Hochul Announces Major Action to Address Winter Surge and Prevent Business Disruption as COVID-19 Cases and Hospitalizations Rise Statewide \(ny.gov\)](#) *The Allegany County Department of Health will continue to provide COVID vaccinations and testing to Allegany County residents. See www.alleganyco.com for the links to register for COVID vaccinations and testing.*

7. Many stores, particularly groceries, have signs on their doors saying that in accordance with CDC guidelines, vaccinated people do not need to wear masks inside the store. Our understanding is that CDC guidance is that both vaccinated and unvaccinated people should wear masks inside in high risk geographic areas which, basically, has been the designation for

Allegany County for months. This seems to be false advertising. Why hasn't/isn't the health department doing something about this?

This is an individual business decision. Allegany Hope would have to direct this question to the businesses in question. The Allegany County Department of Health is available to assist businesses with questions.

8. A question from one of our readers: Is the health department going to advocate that businesses require employee vaccinations?

ACDOH is choosing education and assistance at this time for those businesses that have requested help. We believe that our residents will make the best decisions based on the information that is currently available. The ACDOH will continue to provide and offer opportunities for COVID-19 vaccinations and continue to look for ways where we can remove barriers to vaccination for any individual who is interested.

9. Two weeks ago today (Tuesday, March 23, 2021), Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, after declaring a state of emergency, specifically named Allegany and other area counties as “reckless” for not acting to protect the public from COVID-19, saying that they are “putting the lives of your constituents at risk.” What is your response to his statements?

ACDOH is concentrated on educating, vaccinating, and if needed testing the residents of Allegany County for COVID-19. Reacting to what another County says or does, does not help the residents of Allegany County.

10. We have many readers who have expressed frustration over and over again during the past 20 months with the ACDOH's lack of transparency in regard to what is happening, feeling they are being left in the dark. Putting out numbers every day that have little correlation with anything unless someone tracks the data on an ongoing basis themselves places major obstacles in the path of people understanding and having confidence in reports of what is happening. Are there any plans to respond to the people's questions on a broad base rather than continually telling them only what the county and ACDOH feel they should know, which appears to be on the level of “very little”?

ACDOH is in the process of updating the dash board. ACDOH continues to provide education, COVID vaccinations, COVID rapid testing and contact tracing to the residents of Allegany County which are vital to curving the high positivity rate in Allegany County. We have been transparent with any information that has been requested of our office as Allegany Hope has filed many, many F.O.I.L. requests and information has been provided. Many residents we have found do not know about the daily reporting of the COVID stats and merely look at Facebook as a means for all information. We encourage our residents to educate themselves and view the trusted resources for information to include the Allegany County website where daily case counts, quarantine numbers, townships, deaths, and other important statistics are reported. We are in the process of refreshing the data to include information that individuals want to see with a quick snapshot of what the County looks like one day with previous days date for comparison. There have been several questions regarding reporting school information. The information is

reported daily on the school report cards and not necessarily agreeing daily with our information. We agree that you cannot understand where we are going if you cannot compare it to where we have been.

11. Over the course of the past 20 months, the ACDOH appears to have issued guidance or regulations to school districts but generally has not made them public. As a result, on at least two occasions, Allegany Hope has had school superintendents provide differing interpretations. Why are these guidance documents not provided to the public so there is public awareness, no question as to what they say or, at least, everyone is working from the same script?

ACDOH and all Allegany County School Superintendents have been provided the same information. ACDOH is working with Allegany County school districts to provide guidance, COVID vaccinations, COVID testing and contact tracing for isolation and quarantine as needed and in the absence of any State guidance. We would request that on two occasions those questions be directly routed to the Allegany County DOH where we could educate those individuals. Most of the guidance that is referenced was later tabled when the State came out with conflicting information or additional information we found that having released certain information to the public would have caused mass confusion and a more difficult time for our school districts when State guidance was looming. We understand the balance and need for information, the requirements for schools are posted both on the State Education website and on the State Health Department website.

12. We also are receiving numerous ongoing reports from parents with children in school and under quarantine being without clear information in regard to what they need to do in general, along with confusion as to what they need to do under various actual and potential quarantine/isolation situations. This indicates that any messages, if given, aren't getting through. What is being and can be done to rectify this situation?

More clarification on this topic is needed. ACDOH contact tracers provide parents with an opportunity to ask questions, and isolation and quarantine orders contain email and telephone contact information for additional questions. On each and every phone call, we provide education on vaccinations if needed, resources for the individuals to reach out. My initial guess to this question is the State contact tracers. The State contact tracers reach out to all contacts of positive cases, and when the surge was at its height, the contact tracers reached out to some positive cases as well. With the onboarding of new staff to keep up with the demand, it would not be surprising if new employees may forget to ask certain questions or thoroughly explain circumstances. This is a continual process to train new staff as the ACDOH has on boarded several new staff as well. We want the public to understand that this is a very large and complex operation and with increased numbers of cases and contacts, the system becomes overloaded which is why we may not be as responsive as our residents are typically used to, and we understand that frustration as well.

13. With the general dissatisfaction that we have heard repeatedly in regard to the county's COVID dashboard, why has it taken so long to respond with what is reported to be some type of revamp of the site?

ACDOH is in the process of updating the dashboard that will provide a snap shot for the day, and we welcome any comments or feedback on things that residents would like to see. On occasion, we cannot supply specific information as we may not have the complete data set, and we want to try and provide the whole picture as best we can.

14. How is the county determining what is going to be included on the revised dashboard? Has it asked the general public what it wants to see?

ACDOH is in the process of updating the dashboard. Requests from the public have been considered in this process.

15. How many individual people are viewing the dashboard each day, week and since it has been up and running?

The website provided the following numbers from February 11, 2021 to December 9, 2021:

- *Item Views during that Period: 40,086*
- *Average Item Views Per Day: 133.18*

16. Why would the media want to spend the weekend coming up with questions, submit them a day in advance, not knowing whether they will be answered, whether the answer will be clear and complete, and with no opportunity for followup and, most important when yesterday's (Monday's) questions, in this fast moving COVID environment, may be old news in that 24 hours period until Tuesday?

The request for questions prior to the press briefing was to guide the information presented to answer those questions. The follow-up is the FAQ that we are providing to you now and answering all of those questions. We also did not want to cut off any question from the public; this is the time to ask whatever you feel is necessary, not focus the conversation, and we think it has opened up the dialogue a bit more and created a space to share ideas.

17. We have provided to the county on several different occasions information on free trainings in regard to providing public information to the public during a public health emergency. It all basically provides the same guidance. The last time we obtained data from the county, it appeared there is a lack of persons training in this important area. Why has this need for solid communication with the public been ignored for 20 months and only now is being recognized as a problem with dire consequences?

ACDOH and county staff working on the COVID pandemic have completed the required trainings for their job duties. An assumption that someone is not trained to your specific standard is outrageous and further fans the flames of public anxiety during this difficult time. The reporting that Allegany Hope has provided would also likely not meet this standard of training. We do not feel like any communication with the public has been ignored, we have answered each F.O.I.L. request. At the beginning of the pandemic and continuously thereafter, Allegany Hope has requested F.O.I.L. as the option to communicate with the ACDOH and has ridiculed our office and organization because we do not provide information in the exact format that you have requested. Might I add that anyone can report on Facebook and pose as media

and Facebook in Allegany County reaches only a small segment of the population, which is why we utilize various sources for media outreach.

18. A basic principle of solid public communication, especially in a public health crisis, is dissemination to the widest possible audience. Why is Allegany Hope being required to submit multiple Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests a week for information, which we feel should be automatically disseminated on a daily basis to all media for wide distribution as to what is happening in the county so people can become more aware and respond accordingly?

Clarification of the question is needed. Clarification of “we” is needed. ACDOH has not received FOIL requests from the media sources covering Allegany County. If the question relates to the school report cards and the data, they release then the question would have to be addressed with each school district. Also, we would state that Facebook and Allegany Hope do not cover a large portion of Allegany County. Our press announcements go out to radio, local newspapers, and other organization groups on our media distribution list. We would argue that this information has been broadcast to our media distribution list.

19. Another basic principle of solid public communication is for authoritative sources to be available to answer questions from the media. Therefore, what is the purpose in insisting that all questions be submitted in writing, when some aren't answered, many answers require one or many followup questions for better understanding which is time-consuming and disproportional to the benefit to the media inquirer, and all of this leading to less publicity and full understanding of the issues which should be conveyed to the public?

The request for questions prior to the press briefing was to guide the information presented to answer those questions. ACDOH requesting questions from the media allows for the correct ACDOH staff person to provide a correct and approved response. Per our original FOIL request response during the start of the pandemic, we request media sources to put things in writing so that we can provide the best resources and sources available.

20. We are receiving more reports from our readers that they haven't been able to obtain answers to their questions from the county health department through its telephone response system, even more in the past couple of weeks than when there was a problem at the start of the pandemic. We don't have knowledge of the validity of these complaints, which are being made in passing but, if there is a problem, why is it occurring, and, regardless, where should people go since they say they aren't receiving answers at the generally published number?

Clarification and validation is needed. ACDOH responds to 100s of telephone calls each day so many people leave messages. We ask the public be patient while our staff work to return 100s of telephone calls each day and continue to do contact tracing for our positives each day. The increase in positive individuals overloads the entire system. We cannot just surge and flex our capacity within a day.

21. Why isn't more effort being taken to search out and mitigate the misinformation and rumor mills among county residents, which is a basic tenet of solid public information dissemination and education, and which seemingly would do much to help overcome some of the public awareness issues which now have become an additional crisis?

Many agencies in Allegany County are assisting the ACDOH to dispel the myths and misinformation and provide accurate information to the residents of Allegany County. Unfortunately, the amount of misinformation that comes to the residents of Allegany County through many means (word of mouth, internet, social media) is massive. Like many other counties, we do not reply to Facebook comments as this only leads to further distrust and needless arguments as Allegany Hope has seen and has responded to on several occasions on their Facebook page.

22. For the County and the Hospital: It is recognized that it takes some effort to publish data in regard to hospitalizations, both regular beds and intensive care, along with what percentage of COVID patients are vaccinated versus unvaccinated, although it seems this could be done with a fill-in form which simply is emailed. However, each time this information does get released it garners some of our highest reaches on Allegany Hope Community News. Wouldn't it be beneficial to provide this information on some type of regular basis to reenforce the message about hospital capacity and the problems associated with it, and to gain credibility, rather than providing the opportunity for naysayers to call the numbers provided only once in a while a fluke or misrepresented, particularly since this data apparently already is being provided to CDC (which is hard to decipher on its website) and, possibly, the State Health Department?

Answer from JMH-Because we are a rural facility in a small community, we are very cautious to protect patient privacy; and therefore, take an approach that will ensure that privacy while still communicating with the public when challenges arise. We will continue to report to the NYS DOH as required and will review our process for public messaging.

23. For the Hospital: Are there any plans to require individuals coming to the hospital to be vaccinated or have a completed PCR test, as reportedly is occurring at Roswell and some other facilities?

Answer from JMH-There are no plans to require a vaccination for individuals coming to the hospital because we are the only full service acute hospital in Allegany County, unlike specialty hospitals such as Roswell. We remain dedicated to providing care to our community regardless of vaccine status, but again ask that the community support us by getting vaccinated in order to help keep us all safe.

24. For the Hospital: What is currently anticipated in regard to continuing elective surgeries?

Answer from JMH- Jones Memorial will comply with any NYS DOH guidance, and at this time we are offering all services. We do review any surgery requiring an inpatient stay and may need to reschedule those elective cases until such time a bed can be available. We thank the community for your understanding if we do need to reschedule and again ask for your support by getting vaccinated so that we can reduce the number of COVID+ inpatients and ensure we have beds available for elective services.

25. When is the next live press briefing anticipated, on what schedule, and whether it will be changed to a press conference, with live questioning available.

Nothing has been planned at this time and we do not want to overuse this source. We recognize that many individuals do not have access to the internet and are not able to receive information through this type of source. We recognize that our press announcements have been over utilized which is why we wanted to impart the information during a press briefing to try something new and different and to impart the importance of diligence when dealing with COVID-19.