In January, we announced a $25 million grant from the federal government to improve Pennsylvania’s rural health system; released permit applications for growers/processors and dispensaries as part of our Medical Marijuana Program; welcomed thousands of visitors to the department’s booth at the 101st Pennsylvania Farm Show; and increased awareness across the state of the available of the life-saving medication naloxone.

In the coming editions of the Health Matters newsletter, we will provide you with updates on the progress of these exciting and important initiatives. We look forward to continuing our work to further the department’s mission of improving the health of all Pennsylvanians.

- Karen

February is Heart Month! Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, so everyone should take steps to protect themselves. Learn how from the CDC Heart Month website.

February is typically peak flu season in the U.S., and this month looks to be no different. Flu activity is now widespread across Pennsylvania. This means it’s more crucial than ever for you and your loved ones to take the proper steps to prevent the flu.

The single best way to protect against the flu is to get a flu shot – it’s not too late to get one if you haven’t done so already! Additional tips for preventing the flu are available on our website here.
Black History Month

February is Black History Month - a time to recognize and celebrate the many African Americans who have made an impact on our nation and have been pioneers in health care. It’s also a time to learn about the health disparities affecting the African American population, such as high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, heart attacks, and diabetes.

Learn more about taking action to address these health conditions on the [CDC website](https://www.cdc.gov).

Rural Health Initiative

On January 12, [Governor Wolf announced a $25 million investment](https://www.governor.pa.gov) from the federal government for improving Pennsylvania’s rural health system. The new initiative associated with the investment, called the Rural Health Transformation Initiative, aims to lessen the divide between health outcomes in urban areas and those in rural areas, which are generally poorer due to lack of health care access, the opioid epidemic and more. The initiative will transform payment models from service-based to outcome-based reimbursement from insurers and government programs like Medicaid. It will also promote cost-efficient care and will help financially-struggling rural hospitals.

Pennsylvania has the third-largest rural population of any state in the country, and one in five Pennsylvanians live in a rural area. This initiative is crucial for achieving greater health equity across the commonwealth.

Naloxone Awareness Pharmacy Events

Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine continued her naloxone awareness pharmacy tour in January, visiting pharmacies in Westmoreland, Lancaster, Bedford, Lycoming, Montgomery and Centre counties. Each event focused on a different demographic group to reach the largest amount of people possible. The tour continues to provide an excellent medium to let all Pennsylvanians know they can acquire life-saving naloxone at their local pharmacy without a prescription due to Dr. Levine’s standing order.

Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine, County Commissioner Ted Kopas, Superintendent Dr. William Kerr of the Norwin School District and Senator Kim Ward filled a prescription for naloxone at Giant Eagle Pharmacy in North Huntingdon.
Secretary Murphy Speaks at Misericordia University Event

Secretary Murphy was the featured speaker at a public forum addressing the opioid epidemic at Misericordia University. She commented on the extent of the epidemic as well as the Wolf Administration’s efforts to combat it, including:

- Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine’s standing order for naloxone;
- strengthening the Pennsylvania Prescription Drug Monitoring Program;
- forming new prescribing and warm hand-off guidelines; and
- limiting opioid prescriptions to minors.

State Health Assessment Update

The Pennsylvania State Health Assessment (SHA) Update 2016 was recently published to the department’s public website. This update provides the latest health outcomes figures to support measuring progress towards goals identified in the State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP) and supports the department’s accreditation project.

Medical Marijuana Program

On January 17, the Department of Health reached a significant milestone in our Medical Marijuana Program by releasing the applications for permits for grower/processor facilities and dispensaries. DOH will grant permits to 12 growers/processors and up to 81 dispensary locations in this first phase of the program. The permits are anticipated to be given approximately 90 days after the March 20 application deadline. More information about the Medical Marijuana Program and the permit applications can be found on our Medical Marijuana Program website.

HOW TO APPLY FOR A DISPENSARY PERMIT

1. Download application, forms for attachments and instructions.
2. Read instructions carefully. Complete application and attachments A-L.
3. Sign application and other documents as needed. Save on electronic media.
4. Mail the electronic media and fees to the Department of Health by U.S. mail by March 20, 2017.
5. Send questions about application to RA-DHQ4app@pa.gov. Responses will be published on the Department of Health’s website. Deadline to submit questions is Feb. 8, 2017.
PHAB Accreditation

The Public Health Accreditation Board (PHAB) accreditation process for the Department of Health continues to progress. With news of a possible merger of four health and human services agencies including DOH occurring in the future, many may wonder how a potential merger would impact the work of accreditation. PHAB has worked with other states who have also been part of a larger agency, and it does not change in any substantial way the work that has been done or will be done to get accredited. PHAB considers such an agency an “umbrella” agency.

The “Guide to Initial Accreditation” states that “state health departments may apply for accreditation if they are part of an umbrella organization, super public health agency, or super agency that oversees public health functions as well as other governmental functions. However, PHAB will review and accredit only the public health function of the organization.” Therefore, our work toward accreditation will continue as planned.

Teen Health Week

Physician General Dr. Rachel Levine and Deputy Secretary for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Dr. Loren Robinson spoke at an event in the Capitol Rotunda honoring Pennsylvania Teen Health Week, making Pennsylvania the only state in the country to dedicate an entire week to the holistic issue of teen health. Dr. Levine spoke passionately about the importance of talking to young people about relationships, diet, exercise, self-harm and substance use disorder. It also provided the opportunity to talk to teens about the dangers of the opioid epidemic which affects all demographic groups, including young people.

Farm Show

The Department of Health hosted another successful Farm Show booth this year, partnering with Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center to provide free flu shots to over 1,300 Farm Show visitors. The booth also provided other fun and educational offerings to the public, including hands-only CPR demonstrations, interactive WIC games, and a smoking cessation display. It also offered vital public service information like a looping video showing how to administer naloxone and information about how to become an organ donor.

Department of Health News Available Online

All DOH press releases can be found on the department’s website! Visit: www.health.pa.gov.